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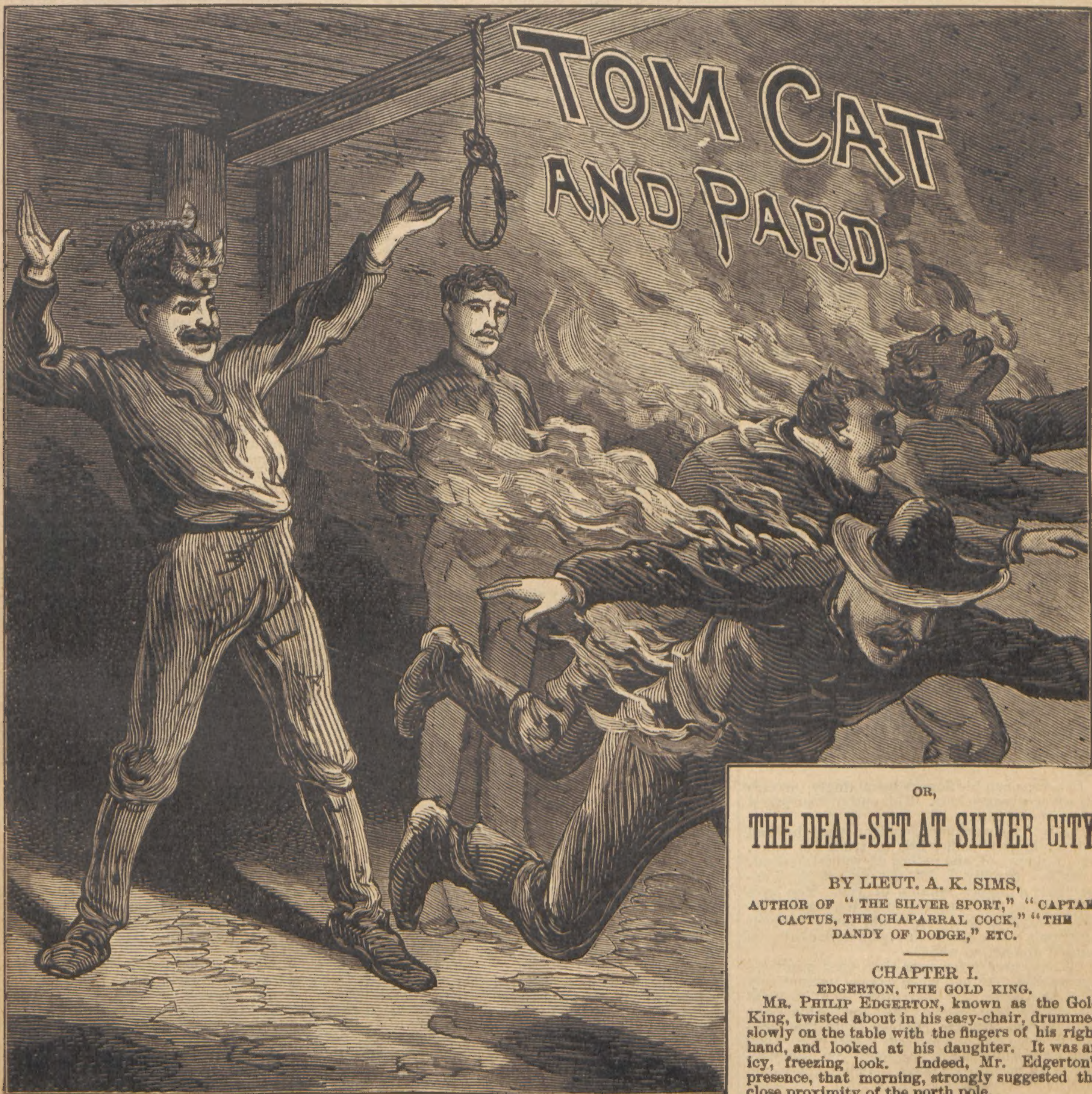
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OR,
THE DEAD-SET AT SILVER CITY.

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AUTHOR OF "THE SILVER SPORT," "CAPTAIN
CACTUS, THE CHAPARRAL COCK," "THE
DANDY OF DODGE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

EDGERTON, THE GOLD KING.

MR. PHILIP EDGERTON, known as the Gold King, twisted about in his easy-chair, drummed slowly on the table with the fingers of his right hand, and looked at his daughter. It was an icy, freezing look. Indeed, Mr. Edgerton's presence, that morning, strongly suggested the close proximity of the north pole.

Lilly Edgerton was wholly unlike her father in looks and actions. She was blue-eyed, fair-

THE SILVER CIRCLE GANG WAS AGHAST WITH TERROR, WHILE ABOVE ALL RUNG THE CRY:
"SP'T! SP'T! MEEOW-OW-OW! MARIAR!"

haired, warm-hearted and impulsive—the living image of her mother, who had died years before.

She was not hedged in by fierce hauteur and exclusive pride.

Power and the lust of riches had narrowed and contracted Philip Edgerton's affections and withered his once generous impulses. He had made a fortune in the palmy days of the Golden State, and was now striving to double it, in this wild corner of Silverland. As his wealth increased he had drawn more and more away from the communion and society of his fellow-men, until now he was pride-imprisoned—surrounded only by retainers, like a feudal chieftain in an old Rhine castle.

"I have summoned you, Lily, on a matter that concerns the honor of this house. It is a matter that touches my pride—my pride in the Edgerton name. That name has never yet been linked with infamy; nor has any one bearing it ever done aught to dishonor it."

There was a severe sternness on his bronzed and bearded face, and his daughter shrunk from him, as if his words were cruel whips.

"I suppose you know what I refer to!" calmly noting her perturbed manner. "I had no thought that my daughter—one of the Edgerton's—would countenance the attentions of such a man as Clifford Curtis."

"Why, father!" flutteringly.

"Neither did I think that she would welcome any one as a lover, without my consent!"

"I—I couldn't tell you, father. You are so—"

"Proud of the Edgerton name, eh? Yes, I am proud of the Edgerton name! It is worthy of pride!"

"So hard to approach on a subject of that kind!" she persisted. "Father, you are so hard to approach on any subject. I don't know why it is, but you do not seem to invite confidences, even from me. I always felt that you are above such things. That you are—"

"I think I know why you didn't wish to approach me on this subject, Lily!" he broke in. "Clifford Curtis is not a man whose love an Edgerton could feel pride in possessing. Why, what is he?"

"An honest man, father! You know that he is. And intelligent, too, else you would not have placed him in charge of your mining works."

"Pooh! The fellow's smart enough, in his way. But, that isn't the point. What has he got with which to support a wife? And what is his ancestry? Whoever heard of the Curtis name before he chanced to drift into Silver City? Who knows what his father was? A blackleg, perhaps, or worse!"

"I was amazed at the fellow's impudence. He came in here this morning as boldly as if he owned the Comstock Lode. Actually spoke as if he thought himself my equal! Great heavens! The equal of an Edgerton! I felt like kicking the puppy out of the house."

"Stated, as coolly as if he expected me to relish it, that he loved you and that you returned his love!"

"I do!" was the calm and unexpected statement.

The Gold King's icy manner almost forsook him, so great was his wrath and astonishment.

"You—you an Edgerton, and make such an avowal!" he cried.

"Would you have me tell an untruth?" she asked, looking at him through wide, tear-filled eyes. "I do love Clifford Curtis; and he is worthy of any woman's love—even an Edgerton's!"

Edgerton ran his fingers tremblingly through his silver-streaked hair. This outburst surprised and annoyed him.

"Lily!" he continued, coldly, when he had calmed himself sufficiently to trust his voice. "I am surprised and pained at your statement. I will say, frankly, I did not expect it. I entertained a higher opinion of you. You have been trained and educated to fill the highest circles. Can it be that you would throw yourself away on a nobody, who has not a dollar between himself and actual want?"

"I have known for some time that you were approaching the age when women instinctively look for a lover, and marriage. That is right and proper; God designed them for the marriage relation and they are happier there than anywhere else. But you are only a girl yet. Your tastes are unformed. The man you fancy to-day in all probability is not the man you would love five years hence."

"I intended to send you out into the world next year, to flutter your butterfly wings awhile before settling down in the prosaic duties of married

life. In that big world that lies beyond the small circle of these hills you will find many men a thousand times more worthy of your affections than is Clifford Curtis."

She simply bowed her head, as he went on, and he could not tell what impression his words were making.

"Believing that you were not yet capable of forming warm attachments, I turned Cliff Curtis away, this morning. More, I told him that you would never marry him. That, in fact, you were already pledged in marriage to another."

"Oh, father!"

"It is true, Lily!" with stern severity. "I have never told you of it; but there is a man on the Pacific Coast, an old friend of mine, who has a son that would be to you a model husband. My friend is worth a round million dollars, and his son will inherit every cent of it. Besides, the young man is handsome, honest and strictly moral—the qualities you so highly prize in Cliff Curtis."

"Years ago this old friend and I agreed to unite our fortunes by bringing about the marriage of our children."

"So, you understand why I could not countenance Cliff Curtis, this morning. I told Curtis of this. He declared that he would marry you in spite of my injunction to the contrary; and I ordered him out of the house."

"I also discharged him from his position, and warned him that if he persisted in his attentions to you I would shoot him on sight!"

The Gold King said this as coolly as if speaking only of shooting some worthless dog.

Lily Edgerton sprang to her feet, wild-eyed and panting.

"Oh, father, you did not say that?"

"I did! And I repeat it!"

He smote the table with savage energy.

"If Cliff Curtis has any regard for his worthless skin he must keep clear of this house. I intend to run him out of Silver City. He cannot stay here without having some kind of employment to support him. I will see all the men who employ labor in this vicinity and I will pay each of them double what Cliff Curtis could earn, if they will refuse him work."

Lily sunk back into her chair and gave way to a flood of tears.

"There is no use in crying, Lily! Cliff Curtis is not worth a single tear from the eyes of an Edgerton. He will be forced to leave here; and you will forget him before he has been gone a month."

"Never!" she cried springing to her feet, like a young tigress at bay. "You can break me, father, but I will not bend. The Edgerton blood, of which you are so proud, flows in my veins also, you must remember. I will meet Cliff Curtis, and I will marry him, if you disown me the next minute."

"If you do I will kill him as I would a rattlesnake!" thundered the Gold King, his calmness deserting him. "What, my daughter wed such a coyote? Never!"

"You have heard my statement, father!" she asserted, backing toward the door, as if she anticipated physical violence. "I intend to marry Cliff Curtis! With your consent, if your consent can be gained; if not, then without it!"

With this parting shot she slipped through the doorway; and the Gold King sunk back into his chair, breathless and fuming.

CHAPTER II.

A DASTARDLY SHOT.

THE vagrant wind whispered among the branches of the stunted cedars that fringed the little mountain stream flowing by Silver City. A full moon rode high in the sky, plainly revealing the gloomy buildings of the Edgerton Mine; and dimming the twinkling lights of the town.

A footstep sounded on the gravelly bank of the stream; and, in response, a woman hastened from the concealment of the shrubbery and hurried forward, with a glad cry.

"Oh, Cliff, I thought you would never come!" she exclaimed, as the man caught her in his arms. "What kept you so late? It is almost midnight!"

"Let us walk on a little further," he said, "where we will not be observed by any chance passer. I am late, but I feared to come earlier. I thought I saw some men shadowing me."

"Surely father would not employ ruffians to dog your footsteps?"

"It may have been only fancy. I can hardly bring myself to think he would do such a thing. But I didn't want to take any chances."

"Of course you got my note, or you wouldn't be here!"

He led her to a fallen log, well within the shadows, and took a seat by her side.

He was a handsome, manly-looking fellow, as the moonlight had clearly revealed.

"Yes; I got your note, Cliff. And I have been crying my eyes out ever since."

Lily Edgerton looked into her lover's face in a trusting, loving way that revealed the depth of her womanly affection.

"Is it really so bad as you stated? Will you be compelled to leave Silver City?"

"I can see no other way!" he replied, rather gloomily. "This is an expensive place in which to live; and, as you know my purse is rather slender. I visited all the mines this afternoon, trying to secure a position. I found that your father had sent word to every manager in the vicinity, and their works were barred against me."

"Surely father will relent!" she exclaimed, making no effort to check her falling tears. "He cannot be so cruel and hard-hearted."

He drew her to his breast and smoothed the sunny hair back from her fair forehead.

"I fear not, my dear! Not for some time, at least. If I could obtain employment I would stay and trust in the soundness of his sober second judgment. As for his threats against my life, I do not fear them. Whatever he might do he is too honorable a man to stoop to deliberate assassination. He was mad with rage when he made the threats, and now, no doubt, sincerely regrets his language."

"But no matter where I may go I can toil with an ever-renewing and inspiring hope when I feel and know, as I do, that you love me!"

"You know that I love you, Cliff, better than my own life, or I would not meet you here!"

He kissed the radiant, upturned face, out of which the blue eyes shone like stars through rifted rain-clouds.

"I believe you, Lily!" he said, fervently.

"And loving you as I do I cannot bring myself to leave you."

"Will you not fly with me, now, this very night? Before morning we can be far from here! I can secure employment in almost any mining-town. How I would toil and slave for you, Lily! Under such circumstances the severest drudgery would be a delight."

"I know that you have been carefully nurtured, and I almost tremble at my audacity. But, my dear, other lovers have started up the slope of life with only their brave hearts and true hands to support them."

"I would slave for you, as many a man slaves for the woman he loves. We could be in independent circumstances in a few years, with a home of our own. It might be humble, but it would be ours."

"I care nothing for your father's gold, Lily. It is you—and you alone. I have nothing to offer you but a loving heart and a pair of strong and willing hands!"

He paused in his torrent of words and covered her face with burning kisses.

"Oh, Cliff!" struggling feebly to release herself. "Do not tempt me! Please, do not tempt me! I am weak, oh, so weak, and all because I love you, Cliff. Do not take advantage of my weakness."

"I have no fear but that you could support me. It is not that. And I can cook and sew, although you may not think it. But I could not disobey my father in that way. Not now, Cliff. Let us wait a little while. He will relent. I am sure he will; for father loves me."

"If father's consent could be gained I would gladly go to the ends of the earth with you, dear Cliff. And I am certain he will when he sees how he is distressing me. Let us not be hasty. We are both young. If our love is true it will stand the test of time and separation."

In his distress he had averted his face.

"Say that you are not angry with me, Cliff! Let us not part in anger. That would kill me."

"I am not angry, Lily!" he said, again drawing her to him. "But I am so heart-sore. I know that I did wrong in trying to urge you to fly with me. But I cannot bear the thought of separation."

"It will not be for long, Cliff, believe me."

"I hope you are right, Lily, but I cannot shake off my gloomy fears. I cannot drive from my mind the memory of the men, who, I believe, were watching me to-night."

"That shows me that your father is determined in this matter. I am afraid he suspected we would arrange a meeting. I threw the men off the scent and came here unseen, but the action of your father in the matter shows how bitter he is against me."

"But I am causing you unnecessary pain!" as

she gave way to a fresh burst of weeping. "I oughtn't to have referred to that again. Let us talk of something else. My plans; how will that do? Though, to be sure, they are rather indefinite."

"Well, then, my plans! I intend to start to Red Rock in the morning. I know the superintendent of the Eureka Mine, at that point. He will give me work if he can; if he can't, he will recommend me to some place where I can get work."

"If I can obtain a situation similar to the one I held here I will be able to lay by enough in two years' time to purchase us a small but comfortable home. At common labor in the mines I can do the same thing in something less than five years."

"It is a long time to look forward to; but, as you said awhile ago, we are young and can wait. So, whatever I may find to do—and I will find something—I will bend all my energies and thoughts to that one object—a home for you and me."

"If, in the mean time, your father relents and consents to our marriage, the time spent will not be lost. It will be in the nature of an education that shall better fit us for possible trials and sorrows to come."

"If he does not relent I shall insist on our marriage anyway, when I have provided a proper home for you. You will be twenty-one long before the expiration of the two years; and he cannot rightly control your actions in so important a matter after that."

"Will you promise me, Lily, that you will become my wife when the proper time arrives, even without his consent? I will leave you to be the judge of the time! Only I want some definite promise to cheer me through the long months to come."

"You have my promise!" she whispered, softly. "I cannot feel that it is wrong to give it!"

"And now, one thing more!" he said, his rapture shining in his eyes. "We will want to keep up some sort of communication. How can that be done? No doubt your mail will be watched."

"I have thought of that!" she replied, half smiling. "You know Molly Mitchell! She is just the best-hearted, truest girl in this town!"

"Always excepting Lily Edgerton!" with an attempted laugh.

"Now, you are joking me, after your old, naughty fashion! But, I am in earnest about Molly. She is a good, true girl; there isn't a better anywhere, as you know. She is not as highly educated as some I could name, but it doesn't take the polish of an education to develop a true woman."

"Molly shall be our post-mistress. You direct your letters to her, and I will get her to mail mine to you!"

"Capital!" he exclaimed. "You couldn't have hit on a better plan, and as that's settled, let's walk up toward the mine buildings. It is almost twelve o'clock. If your father discovers your absence he will arouse the town in his efforts to find you."

Now that the hour of separation had come, he tried to speak in a cheery and hopeful way.

He assisted her to her feet; and, clinging trustingly and lovingly to him, Lily Edgerton walked with him from beneath the sheltering shadows of the cedars.

As she did so she started back with a wild cry of affright.

A familiar form and figure stepped into the moonlight and leveled a cocked revolver full at the breast of Clifford Curtis.

"Oh, father!" screamed the startled girl, striving to interpose her own body between her lover and that deadly weapon.

A flash and a report was the only answer.

Clifford Curtis threw up his hands, reeled and fell to the earth; and Lily Edgerton, with a heart-rending cry, sunk down in a deadly swoon beside him.

CHAPTER III.

THE GOLD KING IN JAIL.

WHEN Lily Edgerton returned to consciousness, it was late in the afternoon of the next day.

She was lying in bed in her own room. Her friend, Molly Mitchell, was keeping watch by her side.

"Where am I?" she cried, staring about in a bewildered way. "I feel like something dreadful has happened."

Then she started, shrunk back in a terrified way and drew the bed-clothes about her face as if to shut out some horrible sight.

"Oh, father! Cliff!"

"Don't take on so, dear!" urged Molly, laying her hand softly on the head of the trembling girl.

Lily looked up into the face of her friend, threw her arms about her and said, convulsively:

"Tell me all, Molly! Tell me the worst! I am strong, now! Oh, so strong!"

Her eyes were hot and dry; and her face was flushed and feverish.

"It's only bad news that I could tell you, dear!" said kind-hearted Molly. "If you can go to sleep again for awhile, it will do you a heap of good. You will be stronger then; and I will tell you all I know. Here, drink this! It's somethin' left by the doctor."

Lily pushed the potion away with a firm hand and sat up in the bed.

"I am not a child, Molly, to be put off in that way. I will know everything. If you will not tell me, I will go out in town and learn the truth. Where is father?—and—Cliff?"

Her eyes took on a fierce and determined expression.

"Don't, Lily, dear! Don't take on so! You frustrate me. I'm that nervous, now, I can hardly stand."

The fierce light died away, to be supplanted by a look of tenderness.

"Forgive me, Molly. I don't know what I am saying, scarcely. I am almost wild. Tell me what you know, please. The suspense will surely drive me mad."

"If you think you can stand bad news, dear. Maybe I'd better not say anything much yet. This stuff will make you sleep, and you'll feel more like yourself after it."

"I can stand anything, Molly!" with a terrible calmness and composure. "Anything! I am iron, steel! Nothing can be worse than my fears. Cliff is dead; I know it. I can see it in your eyes."

Molly retreated to her chair and buried her face in her apron.

"Tell me all about it, Molly!" Lily insisted, with a shade of impatience. "I can bear anything now. Was he instantly killed? Why did they not revive me and take me to him? Where is he now? I must go there if I have to crawl. Oh, Cliff! Cliff! To think that you should have been slain by the hand of my own father!"

"He was dead, dear, when they took him up!" said Molly, in an awe-struck voice. "Oh, it's awful to think about!"

"Where is his body?" Lily demanded, her feverish fierceness returning!

"They buried him this morning!"

"Buried him?"

"Yes, dear; they buried him early this morning. I didn't get to see him, for I had to stay here with you. You was that bad for awhile, the servants had to hold you in bed."

Lily shook convulsively, as Molly made the statement, but not a tear came to relieve her overcharged heart and brain.

"Oh, Cliff! Cliff! Can it be that you are dead?"

Then, looking up with a suddenness that startled Molly:

"Where is father?"

"They arrested him, dear. He is in jail now. I thought maybe you'd want to see him, but didn't know, and so couldn't tell whether I best tell you or not. But you asked me so straight and in that way."

"That's right, Molly! Don't keep anything from me. It is best that I should know everything. Nothing can hurt me worse than the knowledge that Cliff is dead!"

"Maybe you'll want to go to see him?" Molly ventured in an inquiring tone. "Father went over there this morning, but the jailer wouldn't let him in. They couldn't well refuse you, though, seeing that you're his daughter."

"They say Mr. Edgerton—your father, I should say—is as cold and hard as ice about it. He won't talk on the subject, that's what the jailer says."

Lily scarcely heard this last. Her thoughts were with the lover who had been so suddenly torn from her.

"No, I couldn't go, Molly!" she said, at last, as if she had been turning the subject over in her mind. "It would kill me, to stand face to face with father, knowing what I do."

"Oh, how could he be so cruel! It doesn't seem like my father, to do such a deed. And yet, I saw him, Molly! He came out into the wide bar of moonlight, and brutally shot Cliff down at my side."

"I wonder if I am not dreaming? Oh, it cannot be true! Cliff dead; and my father his mur-

derer! Tell me, Molly, that it's only a hideous dream!"

"I wish I could, dear heart!" said Molly, soothingly.

"Why did they bury him so quickly?" Lily asked, after another passionate and tearless outburst.

"That I can't tell you," Molly replied, with a puzzled air. "I've been wondering about that ever since I heard they'd buried him. I run over home a little while, at noon, and spoke to father about it. But he don't know no more'n I do. He didn't see it done."

"There's the queerest-looking chap at our house, though, you ever saw; and he's as sharp as a steel-trap. He's got an idee that Cliff Curtis isn't dead, at all. That there's something crooked at the bottom of it."

"What!" exclaimed Lily, straightening up and staring fixedly at her friend.

"Yes!" replied Molly, smiling at the new light that shone in Lily's eyes.

"He thinks there is some kind of a game being played. He couldn't give any particular reason. The only thing I hang any hope on is that the chap's smart; and wouldn't talk that way if he didn't have some idees."

"He's queer-looking, as I said, but you can tell that he's got sense. And his name is queerer than his looks. Of course it ain't his real name. It's just his 'handle,' as the Western folks sometimes say."

"He stated that he had a pard following him, who could get at the tap-root of the thing, if anybody could. This pard will be here this evening. The man over at the house is expecting him, now, every minute."

"When he comes I'm going to lay this case before him. Maybe he can find out something."

"Oh, do you really think there is a possibility that Cliff is alive?"

Molly had no very strong hopes, but she could not blot the new light from the eyes of her stricken friend by saying so.

"I'm sure I don't know what to think, dear. There is always hope, you know. This queer-looking stranger seemed very positive in his opinions. He said he *known*, by the looks of things, that there had been crooked work. And it does look like it, judging from the hurry they were in at the burying."

"They can disinter the—the remains!" said Lily, chokingly. "That will reveal all!"

"Yes; that's what I was going to say, but I hated to. Dig him up. If they didn't really bury him, there won't be nothing to dig up, you know. That's what I'm going to say to this stranger when he comes."

"Oh, can't I go with you to see this man?" Lily asked, excitedly.

"It wouldn't do, dear!" protested Molly.

"You're that weak you couldn't get out of the house. You think you're strong, because you're so worked up; but you're as weak as a baby. The doctor said you mustn't leave that bed for a week. I expect he'll give me 'bankins' too, when he finds out how I've been talking to you. But, you would have me tell you everything, you know; and you were so wild-like when I didn't speak as quick as you thought I ought to."

Molly's plump and rosy face showed that she was suffering acute mental distress.

"I won't insist," said Lily, noticing the expression. "But your words, Molly, have put new hope into my heart. I will try to think that Cliff may be alive, until I can no longer entertain even that hope. Time will tell; but, oh, it seems like I cannot wait."

"I ought to send some kind of word or message to father, but I can't. Has he inquired about me, Molly?"

"I don't know, dear. No word has come to the house since I have been here."

The new hope which had entered the heart of Lily Edgerton now unsealed the fountain of tears, and she gave way to a wild burst of weeping, which quite startled kind-hearted Molly Mitchell.

When it was over she expressed a desire to be left alone for a time; and Molly hurried home, to see if the expected stranger had yet put in an appearance.

CHAPTER IV.

A LOVE-SICK TOM-CAT.

THE stranger who had "dropped in" at the residence of John Mitchell, the miner, was, as Molly stated, "a queer-looking chap."

He was a genuine cowboy, as could be seen at a glance. Instead of wearing the regulation wide-rimmed cowboy hat, however, his head was covered by a catskin cap—the partially mounted head of the animal serving as the

visor, and the banded tail curling around the cap like a plume.

He was unlettered, but he was naturally shrewd and keen-witted, and had gathered a vast store of information in the years he had spent on the Western trails and ranges. In addition, he was quick in action, and daring to the verge of recklessness.

He had given his name as the Texas Tom-cat, and seemed uncommonly proud of the appellation.

"Thar's a heap more things than you'll find writ in books," he remarked to honest John Mitchell, as the twain sat with chairs tipped back against the wall, in the shade of the cabin that hot afternoon. "The letters on a Chinese tea-chest air powerful plain to them 'as kin read 'em, but they ain't no plainer than the tracks a villain's boun' to make when he's at his villainy. The tracks air like the letters on the tea-chest. Tain't everybody kin read 'em."

"Now thar's somethin' crooked about this hyer shootin' scrape. What it is I can't jist make out, but thar's a mam comin' acrost yonder who kin read it easier'n a heathen kin jabber Chinese."

A horseman had mounted a swell in the winding trail, and was linned clearly against the sky-line as the Tom-cat pointed toward him.

"I'll jist step out that way an' give him the number of my hotel."

Ten minutes later the horseman, in turning a spur, was assailed by a series of screeches and caterwauls:

"Mariar! Mariar! Sp't, sp't, sp't! Meow! Mee-ow-ow!"

"Oh, dry up, Tom-cat!" he cried, reining in. "Come out from behind that rock. You can't startle me with your howling; I'm used to it."

Thus adjured, the Tom-cat stepped into the trail, a broad smile lighting his homely face.

The horseman was none other than Bruce Brentwood, the famous detective, on the present occasion the partner of the Texas Tom-cat.

On this trip he was trailing an embezzler, who had fled to the wilds of Silverland to escape arrest, and had persuaded the Tom-cat to leave the Texas ranges long enough to accompany him on this man-bunt.

"Seen anything of our game?" he asked, as the Tom-cat advanced.

"Neither ha'r ner claws!" was the characteristic reply. "But, ole man, thar's bigger game afoot, or I ain't a Tom-cat. I jist stepped out hyer to kind o' warn ye. I've hung up acrost yender at that cabin, an' if you'll jist go over there I'll talk—er git some one to talk fer me. An' as fer chuck, thar's a gal thar 'at kin set out sich vittles that a dead man 'u'd have to eat!"

Bruce Brentwood smiled at the cowboy's enthusiasm, and jogged along leisurely in his rear.

Molly Mitchell came in just as they reached the cabin, and there was a general introduction and hand-shaking.

It could be seen by any one that the cowboy was desperately enamored of the fair Molly. He blushed and coughed, and bit off a "meow," which, as he hesitated for words, his lips unconsciously formed.

"So the wind lies in that direction!" thought the detective, as he noted the Tom-cat's evident confusion. "I don't suppose, though, that that can be the game he spoke of."

"Now you go right on an' tell Mr. Brentwood what you know about this 'ere case!" said Mitchell, in his blunt way, speaking to his daughter. "If I rightly ketched on to what the Tom-cat said, he's the man to clear up the p'int we war talkin' 'bout!"

"Yes! Miss—hem, Miss Molly! Go right ahead!" urged the Tom-cat, who delighted in listening to the music of her voice. "We'll kind o' herd around the aiges an' see that you don't get lost from the trail."

Molly blushed slightly, as all eyes turned to her, and plunged at once into her narrative.

"Straight as a string!" declared the cowboy, enthusiastically slapping his knee, as she concluded. "Now, I put it to you: Ain't that as bad as hoss-stealin'?"

In the eyes of the Tom-cat, horse-stealing was the greatest crime that could be committed.

"Which?" asked the detective, as soberly as a judge. "The fact that the girl had a lover? There are several parts to the story, you must remember!"

The cowboy gave him a reproachful look, as he answered:

"The killin', o' course! You know well enough what I mean. It's a sin, I reckon, 'cause I can't sling words quite as straight as some other folks."

"If words were ropes, now!" with a sly

glance at Molly, intimating, perhaps, that if they *only* were, there would be a rosy-cheeked girl in that vicinity with a matrimonial noose around her neck almost before she knew it.

"You could handle them as well as anybody!" said Molly, putting in an oar, to relieve the growing embarrassment.

"Ay, that he could, I'll warrant ye!" declared honest John Mitchell. "These 'ere cowboys air master-hands with a rope."

"Thankee! Thankee, most kindly!" said the Tom-cat, wiping his flaming face with a big red handkerchief. "I do b'lieve it's the hottest day I ever see! Lizzards war jist a-cookin' out on the rocks, when I come along awhile ago!"

"There may be something in this case!" said the detective, thoughtfully. "The only suspicious circumstance, so far as I can see, is the sudden burial of this young man. I would like to look into it; but, really, friends, I have other fish to fry just now."

"Let 'em simmer awhile!" shouted the Tom-cat. "Twon't hurt 'em! Jist think of a young lady act'illy a-dyin' over this hyer—hyer—death of her lover, and mebbe he ain't dead at all. Mebbe he's jist a-waitin' som'eres, with open arms to—to—"

He glanced toward Molly and again colored to the roots of his hair.

"To lead her with the bridle!" he spluttered, trying to extricate himself from the deep water into which he had floundered.

"To the bridal!" corrected Molly, again coming to the rescue.

"Well I knowed it had somethin' to do with a hoss!" snorted the cowboy, once more mopping his face with his flaming handkerchief.

"If Clifford Curtis is not dead," continued the detective, smilingly, "then Edgerton has some reason for trying to make the world think him dead—that is if Edgerton really had a hand in the burial."

"You say that the Gold King was in jail when the burial took place?"

"Yes!" replied Mitchell.

"Were the men who had charge of the remains—supposing them to be such—in the pay or confidence of Edgerton?"

"I don't know as they were! The Gold King had no dealin's with any of 'em, that I ever knowed on, 'cept Hank Hammond, the gambler. He used to play cards with him a good deal. As fer frien's, I don't think that Edgerton had more'n a fistful in the hull town. He warn't a man to make frien's."

"It may be that this Hank Hammond maneuvered the thing for Edgerton!" Brentwood replied, after a moment's thought. "The young man may not have been killed by the pistol-shot; and Edgerton may have wished the world to think him dead and so spirited him away, fearing to finish the job he had begun."

"And, yet, that don't look at all reasonable. If the young man is not forthcoming, alive, Edgerton will be hung, I suppose!"

"You bet he will!"

"Then if he must suffer for the crime of murder, why would he try to make the world think he had committed such a crime, if, in truth, he had not?"

"It's too deep fer me!" confessed Mitchell, shaking his grizzled head. "I never war good at guessin' riddles; an' ef that ain't one then I'm an owl!"

Molly had withdrawn from the little company, and now announced that supper was in readiness.

"I ain't the least mite hungry!" declared the Tom-cat, who had not yet ceased to mop his heated face.

"Why what's the matter?" asked Brentwood, laughing. "You were bragging, only a little while ago, about what excellent food this house afforded. That was your principal argument in inducing me to come here."

"That 'ere feller didn't eat a mouthful, at dinner!" avowed John Mitchell, solemnly. "Not a mouthful, though I scolded at him the hull time."

"Ain't a-feelin' so extra good aroun' my gizzard!" protested the Tom-cat. "The vittles is good, I'll take my affydavy on that;—ain't no better to be found nowhar! But, gentlemen, I ain't a-feelin' jist right fer eatin'!" and seeing that further persuasion was intended, he picked up his catskin cap and bolted through the doorway.

"Couldn't stand it, no way it c'u'd fixed!" he asseverated, as he reached the trail. "Some men kin eat with wimmin-folks aroun', but I jist can't! An' sich wimmin-folks!"

He broke into a run which soon carried him into the principal street of Silver City.

"Ain't had anything to eat sence mornin'!"

he growled. "I'll jist step into a eatin'-shop an' fill up fer a week. I'll board at Miss Molly's but I'll do my eatin' in town, even ef they do put brother tom-cats into their measly sassiges!"

CHAPTER V.

BRENTWOOD ON DECK.

"HELLO! who's that high-toned galoot comin' acrost yender? Looks like he mou't own the hull camp an' the mountains throwed in! Some blasted spec'lator, I'll be boun'. Ef I war loose frum this job I'd try to round 'im up fer a game o' keards. Them critters is allus got more money 'n they know what to do with; an' so they goes aroun' contin'ally a-saltin' it down in wu'thless holes in the ground. Tharfore, I think it's a man's reeligious duty to relieve 'em of the dust that worrits 'em so much. Money's the root o' all evil; an' they ought to divvy up fer the'r own good!"

"Blinky" Smith, the jailer, peered through the little window of the Silver City jail, that looked out on the street, and snapped, more rapidly than ever, the convulsive lids that shielded his ratlike eyes.

Bruce Brentwood, the detective, in the garb of a well-to-do business man, was picking his way carefully across the stony street in the direction of the jail.

He had at last consented to take in hand the case that seemed so full of mystery. So far as he could see there was no money to be gained by it; and the case temporarily abandoned promised big pay. But he was not in the habit of looking wholly at the money side of the question, when there were cruel wrongs that demanded righting.

He had visited Lily Edgerton and her heart-broken condition had appealed so strongly to his sensibilities that he determined to go to the bottom of the affair.

"Ef the high-steppin' galoot ain't a-comin' hyer!" declared Blinky, half-blinding his eyes with another flutter of winks.

He drew back from the window and advanced to the door as Brentwood rapped upon it with his gold-headed cane.

"Brentwood is my name!" said the detective, thrusting a card into the jailer's hands. "Bruce Brentwood, broker, and dealer in real estate and mining property. I came to see Mr. Philip Edgerton on business. I learn that he has—ah, ahem—been guilty of a little indiscretion that may make it necessary for him to negotiate quite a loan. He can offer gilt-edged security. I understand, for any sum he may wish to raise. If he wishes to sell the Edgerton Mine I could also accommodate him in that way, perhaps."

Blinky Smith winked at the bit of pasteboard, turned it over in his hands, and then replied:

"It's rayther ag'in' orders to let any one in, boss. I'll have to s'arch ye, to see that ye don't kerry any tools in yer clo'es. Not that I don't think you're squar'—fer I do; but orders is orders."

"The Gold King mou't pay some one to fetch 'im somethin' er nuther to cut out with; fer I don't mind tellin' you that this shootin' bizness is likely to go hard with him."

"You think he is guilty, then?" said Brentwood, coolly helping himself to a chair.

The detective was not in so great a hurry to visit the Gold King but that he could stop to pick up any stray crumbs of information that might lie in his way.

"Ain't a bit o' doubt of it!" the jailer replied positively. "Thar's been thousan's o' men hung on less ev'dence."

"What is the evidence, if I am allowed to ask?" demanded Brentwood, handing Blinky a fragrant cigar and lighting one himself.

"Waal, it's 'bout as straight as you ever git sich things."

"It's gin'ral knowlidge in the town that Edgerton war down on the young feller, desp'rit, fer snugglin' up to his darter. Curtis war his sup'rintendent, an' he discharged him that mornin' an' sent word to all the mine-owners not to hire the chap, as he war boun' an' determined to run 'im out o' the country. They do say, too, that the Gold King threatened to shoot 'im on sight."

"That night Edgerton caught 'im out in the grove makin' love to his darter; an' he downed him."

"Did you witness the shooting?"

"No; but I war on han's as soon as the 'arm-war raised, and helped to 'rest the old gent. He war jist ravin', frothin' wild, I tell you. Had to clip him over the head with a shooter afore we could put the irons on 'im!"

"Was this young man—Curtis I believe you said—was he instantly killed?"

"Dead as a door-nail! I don't reckon he

breathed twice after the bullet hit him. He was the turriest lookin' sight I ever see. The bullet must 'a' been a big one, for it act'ly smashed his face all to pieces. He looked so orful that we put 'im into the ground's quick's we c'd the next morning."

"No relatives, I suppose, to carry on the prosecution? It may be that Edgerton will not need any money after all—that is, no great sum."

Brentwood flipped the ashes from his cigar, and asked the question as coolly as if he really had no interest in the affair beyond loaning the prisoner a sum of money for the defense.

"Waal, he jest will, ef he ever pulls through this scrape alive. I don't think money kin save him; though they do say it kin 'most raise a dead man!"

The detective threw his half-smoked cigar through the open door and got up from his chair.

"Might 'a' giv me that, boss!" exclaimed the jailer, blinking at the cast-off cigar, as it rolled along the gravel. "You rich chaps air so thundarin' extravagant!"

"Perhaps this will please you better," said the detective, handing him a five-dollar bill. "That's for your gentlemanly treatment of me, on the present occasion. Now, if you will show me the way to the prisoner's cell, I will consider the debt more than paid!"

"Thankee, boss! Thankee!" grinned the jailer, working his eyelids horribly. "It does my old eyes good to look at a piece of green paper like that. This way, please! Cell number four air the identical place you air lookin' fer."

He had evidently forgotten to make the preliminary search which he had said was necessary.

"Hyer you air!" he cried, jingling a handful of keys and applying one to the lock of the cell-door. "I'll have to lock you in. When you want to get out, pound on the door er holler."

The door clanged heavily behind the detective, the bolts creaked as they shot into place; and he found himself face to face with the prisoner.

"What do you want?" growled the Gold King, through the semi-gloom of the cell.

Brentwood handed him his card.

"Perhaps you cannot see to read it!" he remarked. "It's rather dark in this cubby-hole."

Then, lowering his voice so that it could not reach the jailer, should that individual be listening:

"My name is Brentwood. I am a detective, and have come here at your daughter's request to see if I can assist you in any way."

The prisoner retreated to the wall, stared hard at the detective, and asked:

"Well, what can you do?"

"That's what I came to ascertain."

Edgerton gave a snort of disgust.

"It's ungentlemanly to say so, perhaps, Mr. Brentwood, but I've never been in love with the members of your profession. It's a sneaking, prying trade!"

The detective flushed slightly as these harsh words came from the lips of the prisoner.

"We will not stop to discuss that point!" he replied, somewhat coldly. "It's a question about which men are free to differ. I came to learn what you can tell me of the trouble into which you have fallen."

He had unconsciously raised his voice to a louder pitch than prudence would have dictated.

"I do not care to discuss it!" was the curt rejoinder.

"Have you no word you desire to send to your daughter?"

"None! She is an ungrateful girl, Mr. Brentwood."

"She is lying in bed now at home, heart-broken," observed the detective, his voice softening at the remembrance.

"Such wounds heal easily!" was the sneering reply. "Believe me, she will not die from the effects."

Brentwood could scarcely refrain from flying at the prisoner's throat.

Before he had regained control of himself, the Gold King continued:

"I warned her to give up that dirty dog, and she refused. Let her suffer the consequences. If a man cannot rule in his own household, Mr. Brentwood, where can he hope to rule?"

The detective was thoroughly disgusted by this exhibition of heartlessness.

"Then you have no word to send?"

"None whatever."

The prisoner rudely turned his back on him, and walked to the other end of the little cell.

"Here, let me out!" cried Brentwood to the jailer, giving the door an angry kick.

A jingle of keys was heard in the hall, the door swung open, and the face of the jailer appeared in the opening.

"Do business right up to the handle, eh?" as he allowed Brentwood to slip through into the hall. "Didn't expect to hear yer yawp fer a half an hour yit."

"Couldn't loan him anything," Brentwood replied, dryly.

"Got dust o' his own, I reckon!"

He led the way briskly to the front entrance.

"So long!" he cried, as the detective stepped into the street. "Bring another V when you come ag'in an' you kin board with me as long as you like. That war the best cigar I've smoked sence the year one."

"The scoundrel!" muttered Brentwood, as he walked down the street, thinking of the prisoner and not of the jailer. "If it wasn't for his daughter I'd say that he ought to be hung!"

CHAPTER VI. PELION ON OSSA.

THE next morning, Silver City was treated to a genuine surprise.

The town supported quite a number of men of the black-leg and sporting variety—conscienceless scoundrels, who would rob a man or cut a throat without the slightest compunction.

The king of these gentry was Hank Hammond, the notorious gambler.

He had been in Silver City long enough to gain a controlling influence over the class he represented; and, as he was as shrewd and capable as he was conscienceless, other villains of high and low degree served him willingly.

As has been intimated, Philip Edgerton, the Gold King, was also something of a gambler. He played for mere love of the play, however, and not with any expectation of gain. In fact, it was one of his expensive luxuries, for his losses generally exceeded his winnings ten-fold.

It was his misfortune to fall into Hammond's clutches. The Gold King was deficient in many respects, and in none more so than character-reading. He had little of the discernment of the physiognomist.

Hammond was gay, reckless and dashing, and exceedingly clever as a conversationalist; and the Gold King soon came to regard him as an exceptionally bright and gifted young man.

Hammond knew "which side of his bread was buttered" and assiduously cultivated Edgerton's acquaintance; and not many weeks rolled by until it became tacitly understood that the Gold King was his especial "chum" and quarry.

No one thought, however, that Edgerton was becoming financially involved, for it had never been his custom to play for high stakes.

Therefore, when Hammond went before the mayor, that morning, and produced a sale-bill giving him possession of the Edgerton Mine, after a certain date, if the amount named therein was not then paid, Silver City was aghast with surprise.

The time of payment had expired more than a week before, and Hammond asserted that the money was not yet forthcoming. The payment of the amount named would seriously cripple the resources of a richer man than the Gold King.

"You will notice that the instrument gives me the right to enter into instant possession of the property!" observed Hammond, addressing the mayor in his smooth, oily voice.

"It is duly signed and witnessed, as you can see. The witnesses are Bonanza Bill and Fighting Fred, both well-known in the town, so I think there will be no question as to the genuineness of the document."

The witnesses named were well-known as worthless vagabonds, but the signatures were undoubtedly theirs, and there seemed little doubt that Edgerton's signature was also genuine.

"If there is any doubt as to whether Edgerton really appended his name to this or not, the matter can be quickly settled by sending the jailer to question him. He will not deny the execution of the instrument."

This, in reply to the surprised look of the official.

"What is it you want me to do with it?" questioned the mayor.

"Nothing!" was the rejoinder. "I know you have no authority in such cases and there is no court anywhere near that has. I simply wanted to present the matter to you, as you represent about all the law we have in this country. By so doing the legality of the instrument can be tested, if necessary, and the news of the transfer of the property will be more quickly spread."

"I would not have made the matter public, only for one thing. I think if Edgerton pulls through his present difficulty he can pay the

amount named herein with very little trouble, but I am told that a money-loaner visited him yesterday. I don't know whether Edgerton borrowed anything from him or not. He will probably attempt to get money somewhere to pay for his defense, as I understand that his bank-account is at a rather low ebb. Doubtless the money-loaner who visited him knew of that circumstance and hoped to take advantage of it."

"Now, I intend to enter into immediate possession of the Edgerton Mine and give warning in this court to money-lenders the world over, that that piece of property cannot be incumbered by any debts which Edgerton may contract."

Hank Hammond withdrew from the presence of the mayor as smilingly as he had entered it, leaving that officer and the spectators to cogitate over the affair at their leisure.

He was as good as his word. Within an hour he gathered a large following of allies and admirers and advanced toward the Edgerton Mine, the most valuable piece of mining property near Silver City. Reke Tanner, one of the employees, was acting as superintendent since the sudden dismissal of Clifford Curtis.

Tanner was a grizzled miner from the Golden State—hence his title, Eureka, shortened into Reke. He had been in Edgerton's employ longer than any other man in the works, and had a not unnatural feeling of loyalty for the harsh and stern Gold King.

"What air ye wantin' hyer, anyway, Hammond, that you bring a reg'mint along o' you?" he growled, coming out from among the mine buildings. "Some dirt er nuther, I'll be bound!"

"Nothing that is not lawful, Eureka," replied Hammond, suavely. "The mine has been sold to me and I have simply come to take possession of it. No harm in that, I hope—though you are showing your teeth over it like a bull-dog."

"That's a lie!" shouted the miner, dancing up and down in frantic rage. "It's some trick you're tryin' to play, 'cause you think the old man's in jail and can't help hisself."

A dangerous glare came into Hammond's eyes.

"If you were not an old man, Eureka, I'd wing you for that. But we have to look over the chattering of old men and fools!"

His voice was as calm and sweet as a summer morning.

In reply, Tanner whipped out a brace of six-shooters and flashed them in the faces of the crowd.

"You can't soft-soap me that-a-way, Hank Hammond. You've got a mighty slick tongue, but I know a thing er two as well's some other people; and I know you ain't got a shadder o' right to this property."

"The Gold King may go under fer his foolishness t'other night. Likely he will; but he's got a darter an' I intend to look after her interest same's ef she war my own. An' ye don't git into this mine 'ceptin' it's over my dead body. Help, boys! Rally fer the Gold King's darter!"

The call rung through the buildings and summoned to his side three or four determined men.

"Why, you old fool, what's got into your crazy head?" Hammond demanded, angrily, endeavoring to brush aside the weapon that was leveled at him.

"Mebbe I am an old fool!" Tanner retorted. "But I know two er three things and I know 'em right well. The fu'st of 'em is, that I'll down ye like I would a wolf ef ye 'tempt to pass me."

There was a dangerous fire in the old man's eyes that checked Hammond in his effort to advance. He decided that he must use caution if he did not want to be the recipient of a bullet.

"Come, come, Reke! This is all child's play; you are at liberty to look at the instrument giving me possession of this piece of property, if you have any doubts on the subject. Meantime I must ask you to stand aside and let me in."

"Bluff's a good dog but Hold-fast is a better. We've got possession o' the premises an' ye don't git in 'thout a fight; now you hear me!"

At this assertion Hank Hammond gave a tiger-like spring that carried him past the muzzle of the threatening weapon. Reke Tanner was borne backward and the two rolled over and over on the ground, in a desperate struggle. At the same time the revolver was discharged harmlessly into the air.

Hammond's followers leaped to the assistance of their chief; and by the mere weight of overpowering numbers scattered the mine employees like chaff.

"There, you old fool!" the gambler gritted,

as he struggled uppermost and planted a knee on Tanner's broad breast. "I ought to knife you for this; but I won't. If you give me any more talk, though, I'll beat out of your head what little sense there is in it."

"Here, some one bring me a rope!"

The command was instantly obeyed; and the old man's arms were pinioned behind his back; and a gag was forced into his mouth. Then he was set upon his feet and his face turned toward Silver City.

"Now go!" ordered Hammond, giving him a brutal kick. "And let this be a warning to you and your friends not to meddle with my affairs hereafter. The next time I'll serve you in a way you won't forget in a hurry!"

Boiling over with impotent rage, the old man staggered painfully up the street, soon encountering the Tom-cat, who had been hanging in the rear of the Hammond crowd.

"Whoop!" yelled the Tom-cat. "Hyer's a victim to curiosity—same's I'll be ef I don't quit snoopin' around this unhealthy place."

"Yanked you, did they, pardner?" advancing to Tanner and unloosening his bonds. "'Twas a pesky crowd went along awhile ago."

"Now, ef you'll step over to my hotel I'll interduce you to a gen'lman that'll be glad to ax you some questions. Friend o' mine, gen'lman is, an' he's a-gettin' his brain-pan wuss wound up than any kickin' broncho that ever twisted itself on a picket rope!"

CHAPTER VII.

A CREEPING TOM-CAT.

THE action of Hammond in taking forcible possession of the Edgerton property, cleared Brentwood's brain of the fogs that had clouded it.

It led him conclusively to the inference that the Gold King was being made the victim of some gigantic plot, having for its object the securing of the Edgerton Mine, and the sullen hauteur and intractability of the prisoner promised the success of the effort.

"If it wasn't for the girl," averred Brentwood, addressing John Mitchell, "I would leave the fellow to his fate. He is certainly deserving of no kindly treatment."

The thought of hopeless and helpless Lily Edgerton, whose fate and fortune were bound up in that of her father, spurred the detective to renewed exertions.

He had ascertained that the prevailing element in Silver City was an honest one. It was also stern and obstinate. It believed that the Gold King deserved death for the murder of Clifford Curtis, and proposed to see that he was properly tried, condemned and executed. If the law would not secure this, then it intended to appeal to Judge Lynch.

This element had little sympathy for Hank Hammond, regarding him as a reckless man and a pestiferous agitator, whose influence over the lawless and dangerous class was likely, some day, to threaten the business and mining interests of Silver City.

At the same time they were divided on the question of his right to the property claimed, and held aloof from the affair.

The task Brentwood set himself was the converting of these men into defenders of the rights and interests of Lily Edgerton. And he set about it in the boldest way. He publicly proclaimed his belief in the streets, and personally visited every man of influence.

In the mean time he had instructed the Tom-cat to keep a close watch on the movements of Hank Hammond.

This the Tom-cat found difficult, for Hammond was a regular night-hawk. But the cowboy stuck to the trail with sleepless pertinacity.

"They call this biz'ness shadderin'," he growled, "an' ef I keep it up much longer I'll be a shadder sure 'nuff! Seems like I ain't had any sleepin' fer a week; and as fer chuck, I jest have to grab a hank o' sassage an' run. This chap I'm follerin' don't take any more rest than a steam-engine. Thar's dirt hyer, gen'lmen, thar's dirt! Men don't keep a-bouncin' roun' that-a-way when they're honest. Ef he'd on'y stop awhile, so's I could kinder spit on my han's an' git a fresh holt!"

This muttered protest came from the cowboy's lips as he lay, stretched out in a dark alley, one moonlit night, watching, with hawk-like eyes, the saloon opposite.

Into this saloon Hank Hammond had disappeared, more than two hours before.

"Stays in thar longer'n he's stayed any place sence I've been a-trailin' 'im. Reckon, now, he ain't smelt a mouse an' puckacheed by the back way. That would be a ornery trick."

His apprehensions were soon relieved, for

Hammond came out of the saloon and strolled down the street, arm in arm with a brother sport.

"Hyer goes fer another race!" grumbled the Tom-cat, straightening his cap upon his head. "The boss said I musn't wear this cap while doin' the shadder trick; but confound it, I can't git one o' the reg'lar kind to fit me. They're allus too big, er too little er too somethin'! 'Sides its dark now an' no one c'u'd tell much about it ef I wore a coal-scuttle."

"They're a-breakin' fer the Edgerton Mine. It's a reg'lar hornets' nest down thar, now, 'sence he's filled it full o' men with shooters; but I ain't afraid o' hornets, I ain't!"

He crept along in the shadows of the houses, and succeeded in keeping the sports well in view.

The mine and mine buildings were just beyond the suburbs.

When he reached the last house the cowboy halted, and from its shelter narrowly watched the retreating men. A broad belt of moonlight made it perilous to continue on.

With a sigh of relief he saw Hammond and his companion enter one of the mine buildings, and then concluded to remain where he was until they again came into view.

While lying there a form glided stealthily by him. Then another, and others emerged from the adjacent streets. All were evidently centering at the building into which the sports had disappeared.

"Some kind o' meetin' er nuther goin' to be held over thar! Sh'd think mebbe 'twas a fandango, on'y I don't see any wimmin-folks; an' a fandango without wimmin-folks would be 'bout as int'restin' as a hoss race 'thout hosses. Guess I'll have to snoop up some way an' find out what's a-goin' on."

Then the idea came to him that he could safely approach the buildings by walking boldly out into the moonlight and advancing as if he were one of the expected men. They were all dodging and sneaking more or less, and their faces and clothing could not be distinguished.

He acted upon the idea instantly.

When near the buildings he was almost startled into an exposure.

"The boys air comin' in purty lively, ain't they?" said a rough-looking fellow, stepping from out the shadows.

The Tom-cat's hand was on his cocked revolver, and his fore-finger fluttered nervously over the trigger. Detection seemed unavoidable.

"You bet!" he answered, giving a disguising twist to the words.

Then he hurried on, expecting every instant to hear the command to halt.

It did not come, and he breathed easier when the shadows received him into their embrace.

"A narrer escape!" he soliloquized, as he slowly circled the building in which the men were gathering. "Thort I'd shorely have to plug 'im. Gittin' into a muss don't ginerally skeer me, but fightin' ain't my best holt now. I'm a shadder, I am; jest the creepin', crawlin' shadder o' the Texas Tom-cat, an' not the Tom-cat hisself. Ef I war'youd 'a' heerd me howl a good while ago!"

There seemed no place of ingress. He could hear the low hum of voices within, but could distinguish nothing. Finally, in his desperate eagerness to learn what was going on, he forced a rear window.

The room into which this window admitted him adjoined the one in which the conference—if such it was—was being held.

He drew the sash into place, after passing through, so that no prying eyes could detect anything unusual in its appearance.

Then he crouched low in a dark corner of the room and applied an ear to the wooden partition. This proved unsatisfactory. Some one was speaking; and, although he could distinguish the words, he had a yearning desire to see the speaker's face.

To accomplish this he felt carefully along the partition, moving as softly as a veritable cat, until he came to a door which connected the two rooms. The door was light and would have yielded easily to a heavy blow. The Tom-cat had no thought of forcing it, however, and contented himself with peeping through the key-hole.

His range of vision was necessarily limited. The room was also very imperfectly lighted, the one lamp being turned unusually low. But he could see enough to determine that the apartment contained about a dozen men—sports, toughs and miners—and that they were, all in all, a villainous set.

The man ceased speaking, and Hank Hammond arose to address the assembly.

"Members of the Silver Circle!" he said, in a low but penetrating voice. "We have met again to report progress and discuss the work in which we are engaged. It is a work that requires the three Cs—the motto of our organization—Coolness, Caution and Courage; and I again enjoin their observance."

"So far they have led us right on in the path-way of success. For my part I am glad to report that, with one or two exceptions, everything is working satisfactorily and smoothly. We are in possession of the Edgerton property; and if we can hold it, as I believe we can, our fortunes are made. We can hold it at least until we can turn it into enough money to enable us to leave this country with light hearts and heavy pocket-books."

"Fighting Fred is in from the mountains, and reports that everything is working all right there. Cliff Curtis is improving rapidly—"

The Tom-cat heard no more of that sentence. The words, "Cliff Curtis is improving rapidly!" burned themselves upon his brain, as if written with a pencil of fire.

Then it was true that Cliff Curtis was still alive! And he was in the hands of Hank Hammond's men. What did that mean?

Over all swam the thought that there was still a chance to restore to Lily Edgerton her lover.

The Tom-cat could scarcely contain himself, so great was his joy at this discovery. His own overpowering love for Molly Mitchell rendered him especially susceptible on that subject.

He stuffed his catskin cap into his mouth to keep back the chorus of joyful howls that were struggling upward. This was not sufficient; and to keep from exploding, he found it necessary to give vent to his pent rapture in a series of whispered "meows."

When he again applied a watchful eye and a listening ear, Hammond had passed from that subject; but to one equally thrilling and interesting.

He was giving a running account of Brentwood's efforts to arouse the better elements of the town against them.

"If he succeeds in this we will be likely to have a handsome fight on our hands!" Hammond concluded. "And, if it comes to a fight, we're the boys that can do the fighting. The issue might blast our hopes, however, and so I prefer scheming to open combat."

"I believe that, in order to prevent a possibility of this kind, we will have to see that this detective—for I am satisfied that that is what he is—is placed safely under ground. I have instructed some of the boys to lay for the sneak, and if he does fall into our hands, I promise you it will go hard with him."

There was a trampling of feet, followed by a lumbering knock at the front entrance.

A few moments later two men marched into the room, driving before them a bound and helpless prisoner.

It was Brentwood, the detective!

CHAPTER VIII.

AN EXCITED TOM-CAT.

"LAY low, my good Pedro! Eat your way into the ground as if you were a badger. The moon shines rather bright to-night for a venture like ours. But, it's the daring that win, they say. If that's true, we deserve success."

"Fighting Fred's the bruiser of the outfit. I prefer cunning to slugging skill every time. It's brains that win in this world, not muscle!"

"Maybe you've heard something like that before, though! You've got your rope ready?"

"Ay, senor! If a flock of fool-hens were perched in the tree over us, I could pull one down without in the least disturbing the others. You see that limb out there? Shall I make a cast at it, just to test the thing?"

"I'll take your word for it, Pedro! Hark! is that some one coming?"

Bonanza Bill, the sport and gambler, lifted his head from the ground and peered along the trail leading into Silver City.

"It was a coyote skurrying across the path, I guess! Anyway, I see nothing, and the sound has died away. I thought probably it was our detective friend on his way to his lodgings."

The sallow face of the Mexican curled in a grim smile.

"He'll not reach it to-night, senor, if he comes the usual way. I couldn't miss a bird, in this moonlight; and I'll be sure not to miss a man."

"So you don't string your harness across the shoulders of the wrong chap! It might make trouble, you know. But I take it you've got eyes, Pedro!"

"Hammond said to put the fellow out of the

way. But that's too cold-blooded a suggestion for gentlemen like us to entertain, Pedro! No; we'll not dip our hands in the sanguinary fluid, etc., this round. We prefer to play a finer game than that. We'll simply wrap up his hands so he can't injure himself in any way; clap a stopper in his mouth to keep him from unduly straining his voice; and march him before the Great Mogul and his cohort in session assembled.

"It's a great scheme, Pedro; and when the yellow boys are divvied, don't forget to say that I suggested it. In fact, that it wholly originated beneath the massive and corrugated brow of yours truly! Eh, Pedro?"

The sport turned a laughing and sarcastic face toward the flashily-dressed Mexican at his side.

He was Hammond's lieutenant; and one of the shrewdest and most daring of the men belonging to the villainous organization calling itself the Silver Circle.

His mocking words were arrested by the sounds of approaching footsteps.

"So, the long-awaited comes at last, like a tardy lover to the arms of his sweetheart. I feared, Pedro, that he might be tarrying too long at the wine cup—as you do sometimes. Unkink your lariat and get ready to gather him in."

The detective came steadily forward through the silvery moonlight, all unaware of the snare that awaited him.

His mind was filled with thoughts of the work in hand. He had made considerable progress during the day, and had succeeded in winning over some of the leading men of the town.

He had expected to be dogged and followed, and kept a wary watch in his rear. But he did not anticipate an assault so near the residence of honest John Mitchell; for the trees under which the plotting pair lay stood almost at the corner of the house.

Suddenly a dark line, like a leaping serpent, shot across the moonlight, and the noose of Pedro's *riata* settled firmly about Brentwood's neck.

There was a quick and powerful jerk; and, before the detective could raise a hand to release himself, or shout for assistance, he was thrown so heavily to the earth that his neck was almost dislocated and the breath quite knocked out of him.

At the same instant a lithe form bounded lightly forward, a keen knife glittered in wavy circles before his eyes, and a firm knee was planted remorselessly on his breast.

"Stow your fancy flourishes, Pedro, and tie him!" hissed the low voice of the sport. "We haven't any time for theatricals. We may wake up a hornets' nest if that fall was heard in the house. I've got hold of the lariat, and if he tries to get up I'll scientifically yank his head off."

Pedro dropped the knife and quickly tied the hands of the prostrate man. Then, before he had fairly regained his scattered wits, a merciless gag was thrust into his mouth.

"Good boy!" cried the sport, approvingly. "Pedro, you're wasting your talents. You might become a great light among the bow-string gentry of the far Orient."

Pedro showed his appreciation of the compliment by a marvelous display of milk-white teeth.

"He's coming to, and may kick up some kind of a rumpus, even if he is tied. If you'll get that stretcher, Pedro!"

The Mexican darted beneath the tree and quickly returned with the desired article.

"Now we'll place him on that and lash his feet so he can't fall out. There! That's good. He weighs a hundred and eighty, Pedro, if he weighs a pound! I heard my back creak when I lifted him. A man of that weight, built as he is, would make a nasty fight if pushed to the wall.

"Now, we'll travel!"

A suppressed groan came from the gagged jaws of the detective, as the forward movement began.

"He has regained his senses, my good Pedro," said the sport, peering mockingly into the wide-open eyes below him. "He can't call out, but he can groan, you see! If he should draw the attention of any one by that music we'll say that we're carrying in a pard of ours who has been thrown from a broncho.

"If their curiosity prompts them to be dangerously inquisitive, we'll put a knife into our esteemed friend here and slide!"

The detective could scarcely repress a shudder, so much mocking fiendishness was compressed into the words.

But no one was encountered; and in due time

the litter, with its burden, reached the shadows of the Edgerton Mine buildings.

The cowboy could scarcely repress a roar of astonishment when he saw Brentwood, bound, gagged and helpless, in the hands of his enemies.

"Whoop!" he cried, with difficulty toning the exclamation down to a whisper. "This hyar gits me! Never knowed the boss to git tangled up like that afore."

His first impulse was to burst through the door with mad precipitation, and fight his way to the side of his friend.

"'Twon't do!" he concluded, when he had given himself time to consider the thing. "Better be one o' us loose to kinder skirmish around on the range. I'll wait an' see what turns up. I mustn't fergit that I'm a shadder, now, an' not a screechin', fightin' Tom-cat. An' then, thar's Molly! No; I can't afford to be laid out jest yit awhile."

He again stooped and peered through the key-hole.

"You got him, I see!" said Hammond, with a short, hard laugh, addressing Bonanza Bill.

"Yea, verily! We gathered him in," was the characteristic reply. "Thanks to a little brain-racking of mine, assisted by Pedro and his rope. Don't forget to remember us, Hank, when you make your will."

Hammond strode forward and removed the gag from Brentwood's mouth.

"You sneaking coyote, do you know what we intend to do with you?" he demanded, fiercely.

"You've been cutting a pretty wide swath lately, but we'll throw your running-gear out of plum in pretty short order, now that we've got you."

"The detective made no reply. Perhaps his jaws were yet too stiff. Perhaps he did not consider the threat worthy of an answer. His eyes were roving restlessly around the room, and, as his feet were now free, he may have been considering the chances of an escape.

In this survey, his gaze rested for an instant upon the partition door.

"He's a-lookin' at me!" whispered the Tom-cat, excitedly. "Ef I c'u'd jest give one teenty meow, he'd know 'at they war a friend near that he kin bank on every time. But I dassent! Some o' them fellers hev heerd my gentle voice, an' they'd be likely to recognize it."

"You needn't be so sullen, Bruce Brentwood," continued Hammond. "We know you, and we know that you've been trying to arouse the town against us. We have no quarrel with you personally, but when you stretch your length across our path, we'll step on your head as we would on the head of a rattlesnake.

"You might as well understand first as last that you'll never leave this building alive. So if you have any mementoes that you wish to transmit to your friends, you might as well rake them together."

Brentwood made no reply, but there was a slumbering fire in his dark eyes which showed that he did not intend to die without a struggle.

"We don't care to shoot you. A shot can be heard too far on a night like this. And then, doubtless you would prefer shooting, when you know you have to go. No; we'll simply stretch a rope over that beam and weight an end of it with your worthless carcass."

Written words cannot indicate the terrible and fierce fiendishness with which this threat was conveyed.

Pedro seemed to understand it as a command, for he cast his *riata* over the beam indicated and allowed the noose to dangle suggestively near the prisoner's head.

"Now, up with him!" shouted Hammond, striding forward.

CHAPTER IX.

A FIGHTING TOM-CAT.

"WHOOP! Mariar! Mee-ow-ow!"

The Tom-cat fairly screamed his war-cry, as he cast himself precipitately against the light door.

It yielded to the powerful assault, and amid a shower of flying splinters he bounded into the room.

The members of the Silver Circle shrunk back at this unexpected rush. Their first thought, evidently, was that it was an attempt at rescue in force. None could imagine that any one, however rash, would thus cast himself singly into the lions' den.

Seeing some such emotions depicted on the faces of the recoiling men, the Tom-cat drew his revolver and shouted, as he rushed to the center of the room where stood his prisoned pard:

"Down with 'em, boys! Down with 'em! Whoop! Mariar!"

And seizing the suspended coal-oil lamp he hurled it into the midst of the excited crowd. An explosion followed; the air seemed filled with flame; the Silver Circle gang was aghast with terror, while above all rung the cry:

"Sp't! Sp't! Meeow-ow-ow! Mariar!"

Grasping Brentwood by the shoulder—for the detective was rooted to the spot by the very audacity of the cowboy's charge—he pushed him toward the broken door.

"Git!" he shouted. "Git, er you'll be burnt to death!"

A roar of fright arose from the retreating men as the blazing coal-oil lamp descended into their midst.

The explosion that instantly followed changed this into a succession of shrieks and curses.

The volatile and burning fluid seemed to convert the very air into a sea of flame. Hair, beard, and clothing crisped and crackled; and, as the blistering fire ate its way to their flesh a common rush was made for the doors and windows.

The Silver Circle became converted into a mass of fighting, screaming men, each intent on his own safety and careless of the lives and limbs of his fellows.

Within two minutes the building was emptied.

As the blistered and excited rascals were tumbling pell-mell over each other in their frantic haste, the Tom-cat leaped through the broken door by which he had entered, almost dragging the partially-bound detective with him.

"Git's the word!" he continued to shout. "Git! afore the flame shrivels ye up like's ef you war a horned frog in a prairie fire!"

With one blow of his heavy boot he smashed the window into a thousand fragments; then he stopped for an instant to sever the detective's bonds.

"Now leap through, and I'll follow," ordered the detective. "Look out that some one don't shoot you from the outside."

As soon as Hammond could collect his scattered wits and take stock of the injuries suffered by his men, he found the condition of affairs much better than he anticipated. There was a great array of shriveled hair and beard and enough damaged wearing apparel to start a second-hand clothing-store. Some severe burns had also been received; and the clothing of a few was still scorching and smoking.

No one was fatally or even horribly burned; and as soon as this was known the air again flamed, this time with sulphurous maledictions.

Not that the members of the Silver Circle were angry because they had not been cooked outright! They were mad, fighting, ferociously mad, because they had been whipped by one man.

As they gathered at the side of the building, taking an inventory of the damages sustained, they could hear the flames leaping and crackling as they ate into the floor and walls of the vacated room.

"Surround the house and shoot the first man that appears!" shouted Hammond, drawing his revolver with his left hand, for his right was so burned that the skin seemed ready to slip from the fingers. "They're in there yet, I think, and we'll down them, if it's the last act of our lives. Curse that cowboy! That coal-oil has just about eaten my hand off!"

"Hyar they go!" shouted a man, rushing to the nearest corner.

Brentwood and the Tom-cat were out of the house, and attempting to gain the open ground beyond the buildings. Unfortunately, the members of the Silver Circle were between them and the open road to liberty. A retreat in the opposite direction would bring them to the swift and arrowy river, which the strongest swimmer could scarcely hope to breast. Then there was the additional danger of a fatal shot should they attempt the almost impossible feat of crossing it.

Seeing their advantage, Hammond's men spread out in the shape of a fan and commenced a hurried advance upon the retreating men, firing their weapons as they came on.

"We must find shelter somewhere!" Brentwood said, anxiously. "A few volleys like that will be likely to lay one or both of us out."

"You bet!" stopping the cat-screches, which he had again commenced, long enough to make a reply.

A ball had cut through his precious catskin cap, and another had scraped a strip of skin from his left shoulder.

"Let's hustle fer that stone buildin'! They

can't burn it easy, an' if the walls air as strong as they look we kin hold back a rig'ment."

They broke at once into a rapid zigzag flight. Another volley shrieked and whistled about them; and they could plainly hear Hammond's commands as he led his men forward with a rush.

"Hyer we air!" shouted the Tom-cat, hurling a bar of iron at a window-sash with such accuracy that the sash fell inward, a jingling wreck of glass and wood.

"Now, shin through thar lively!"

The window was almost eight feet from the ground, but both were active men, and it was the work of but a minute to climb, by the aid of the projecting stones, to the window, and drop down upon the inside.

"Whoop!" yelled the Tom-cat, as he realized that heavy stone walls interposed between them and their enemies. "Come on, ye Diggers!"

"I suppose they'll try to break in the doors!" remarked Brentwood, looking carefully about.

"Let 'em!" cried the cowboy. "Thar's on'y two doors, an' we've got a pair o' weepens apiece. Ef ary man gits through my door while the ca'tridges hold out, then ye may call me a granger!"

Hammond saw that his foes had taken refuge in the building, and he halted his men for the purpose of consultation.

The interior of the house which they had just left was rapidly becoming a mass of flames, and the fire was leaping out of the windows in circling sweeps.

Already the town fire-bell was beginning to jangle an alarm; and crowds of boys and men were streaming down the streets.

"We must put on a bold front!" said Hammond calming his scorched and excited followers by the coolness of his voice. "I am the owner of this mining property. These men have been attempting the championship of the alleged rights of the Gold King's daughter. Seeing they were about to fail in their nefarious efforts, they endeavored, in a spirit of revenge, to burn the works. Fortunately we were near to discover the first fire and forced them to seek shelter in the stone building before they could do worse injury or even escape.

"You, my brave boys, under my gallant leadership," with a short and bitter laugh, "cast yourselves boldly into yonder burning house and fought the fire desperately. To that fact your singed beards and scorched and blistered bodies bear ample evidence.

"The house could not be saved; but the fire-bugs are behind those stone walls, and we propose to drag them out and see that justice is done them."

The shrewdly concocted story pleased the members of the Silver Circle; and with wild cries and shouts of rage they rushed toward the stone building.

"Hyer they come!" shouted the Tom-cat. "Ha'r on eend an' eyes a-shinin'! Whoop, Mariar! Git yer shooters ready, fer they mean ole bizness every time. That Hammond's a fighter frum 'Way-back, an' I glory in spunk, ef 'tis on t'other side."

The flames curled upward from the windows of the doomed structure, lapped the shingles of the roof, and then, breaking out in many places at once, swirled and hissed as if filled with a fiendish joy at the havoc wrought.

The crowds of men and boys on the streets thickened, the bell continued its jangling alarm, and a hastily-improvised company of firemen hurried, with hooks and ladders, to the scene of the disaster.

Hammond's men had collected a number of heavy poles. These they poised as battering-rams and rushed with them against the doors.

A shot from the cowboy's revolver answered the thunderous crash, and, as the bullet plowed its way through the heavy door, one of the assailants dropped the log, gave a roar of pain, held up a shattered hand, and staggered backward.

"Down with them!" yelled Hammond placing himself at the head of his force. "Smash the doors into kindling wood and drag the scoundrels out! Hanging is too good for such incendiaries. They ought to be thrown bodily into the fire they kindled."

His men echoed the cries, and another desperate rush was made at the door which the cowboy was defending.

Again a ball plowed its way through the door, this time imbedding itself in the thumping log, and doing no harm.

But it was quickly followed by another, that shattered the shoulder of one of the chief howlers; and the crowd fell back as if by a common impulse.

"You can't batter in that door," growled one of the men. "It's braced with iron. They'll kill every man of us before we can make a breach."

"Then climb to the windows," shouted the irate chief, furiously. "We will drag those fellows out of there, let it cost what it may. This is our golden opportunity. We must take advantage of it."

CHAPTER X.

HEROIC MOLLY.

THE jangle of the fire-bell, and the shouts and calls of excited men awoke Molly Mitchell at the "lone and dead hour of midnight."

She glanced through the window, and, seeing one of the Edgerton Mine buildings on fire, called to her father, and then began hurriedly to dress.

"Hello! What's up?" asked Mitchell, coming out into the sitting-room, as Molly emerged from her own apartment.

He had also hastily arrayed himself, and now proceeded to take down a revolver and belt of cartridges from the wall.

"Looks like somebody'd been tryin' to burn up the Edgerton property, don't it?"

"Yes; that's what I thought as soon as I saw the fire. Now, if you'll get my horse out of the stable, father, I'll run into the street and ask some questions. Be as quick's you can. Someway, something tells me we have friends in danger down there. It can't be that Mr. Brentwood or—the Tom-cat is connected with it."

"I hear firing! There goes a whole volley of shots. It's more than a fire, father; it's a fight! Here, I will help you with the horses. You will want one, too."

She sprung past him and ran nimbly to the stable, where their riding-ponies were kept.

She had hers saddled and bridled almost before her father reached the stable.

"Here is yours," she said, tossing a bridle over its head and handing him the rein. "Slap a saddle on it as quick as ever you can; or ride bare-back."

In her hurry and excitement Molly had not time to pick and choose her words.

She leaped nimbly to the back of the pony and clattered away, without waiting to see whether or not her father was lumbering along after her.

When half-way to the mine she met Reke Tanner, who was racing up the street, bare-headed and almost exhausted.

"Rally a crowd, Miss Molly! Rally a crowd!" shouted Tanner, when he saw who it was. "They've got Brentwood an' the cowboy cooped up in the stun house, an' they swar' they'll hang 'em ef they kin on'y git 'em out o' thar."

The girl's heart almost ceased its beating.

"They who, Eureka?" she asked, leaning forward until her face almost touched the pony's mane.

"Why, Hammond an' his sneakin' crowd! Who else sh'd it be? Who's been at all the sneakin' dirt in this country doorn' the las' six months?"

"But how did they get them cooped up in the stone house?"

"Don't know, miss; an' we ain't time to find out by argyfyin' an' axin' questions. Beggin' yer pardin fer bein' so all-fired blunt! Hammond says that the Tom-cat and Brentwood sot the frame afire."

"It's a lie, o' course, fer thet gambler couldn't tell the truth if he wanted to. But, they's one thing, shore! They'll hang 'em ef they git bolt o' 'em onc't, ef we don't do somethin' to prevent it. Rally yer frien's, miss! Rally yer frien's, an' I'll do likewise."

He ran on up the street pantingly, leaving Molly dazed and bewildered.

Fortunately John Mitchell came up at that moment. His presence served to strengthen and stimulate her.

She hurriedly repeated the information received from Reke Tanner.

"Get together our friends, father!" she concluded, her face white and her voice quavering. "I will visit some of the prominent men Mr. Brentwood has won to our side in the past few days. Send every man you can find straight to the mine."

She wheeled her horse and galloped rapidly away, and John Mitchell began a series of hurried whispers and consultations with many of the men flocking together in the main street.

While these two, with Eureka Tanner, are rallying a rescuing force, let us return to Brentwood and the Tom-cat and the lively scenes being there enacted.

When Hammond gave that order to climb to the windows, he was the first to grasp the projecting stones and attempt to swing himself up. Instead of accomplishing it he fell back with a howl of pain.

He had forgotten his burned hand. The rough stones recalled him to a sense of his injuries, and as the loosened cuticle began to slip beneath his firm grasp, he tumbled back, baffled and bleeding.

"Up there, some of you!" he cried, with a snarl of rage.

Above his command and the thunder of the tumult came the calm, clear voice of Brentwood.

"The man who attempts to enter by one of those windows might as well leave hope behind him. We give you fair warning. We will put a bullet through the first head that appears! We know what you are after and we do not intend to be taken alive."

"Cool as January!" said Bonanza Bill, who stood by Hammond's side. "I think myself that we might as well order wooden overcoats for the men who try to climb in at those apertures!"

One daring and reckless fellow, who had started with Hammond and had continued on when his chief slipped down, now grasped the sash and tried to hoist it to make an opening.

His head was not yet visible to those within the structure, but the hand with which he was endeavoring to lift the sash could be plainly seen.

"I don't want to kill the fool!" declared Brentwood, raising his revolver.

The "spang" of the weapon followed, and the sash was splintered and broken just at the side of the fellow's expanded fingers.

The concussion of the blow numbed and deadened the arm to the shoulder; and with a startled cry the foolhardy climber lurched backward and fell sprawling to the ground.

"It won't do, you see!" repeated Bonanza. "Courage is a good thing, but it leads a man to his death sometimes. If it hadn't been for your burnt fingers you'd have been a pleasant subject for a funeral by this time."

"Something must be done!" shouted Hammond, his wits almost deserting him, so great was his desire to exterminate the men sheltered behind those walls of solid masonry. "The town is gathering and there will be too many inquisitive eyes and ears around us directly."

A clatter of hoofs drew his attention. Molly Mitchell followed by Lily Edgerton and a score of mounted horsemen, among them John Mitchell and Eureka Tanner, thundered into the midst of the crowd, which gave way before them.

"We demand to know what these men have done?" cried Molly, heroically, her glowing face and flashing eyes lighted by the crackling flames of the burning house.

"Done!" roared Hammond. "Haven't they fired the building yonder with the intention of destroying all this property?"

"That's a lie!" cried Reke Tanner. "A ornery sneakin' lie, an' we'll cram it down yer throat yit!"

"Whoop! Mariar!" yelled the Tom-cat from within the building. "The wimmin forever! Jest lissen at 'em, will ye, a-chatterin' at that rattlesnake as sassy as any prairie-dog owl!"

This cowboy must have drawn slightly on his imagination, for only one woman had spoken.

"Friends!" cried Brentwood, raising his voice so that it could be heard above the uproar. "Hammond and his men captured me to-night in a skulking and cowardly manner and took me to the building which is now burning. They were preparing to hang me for the part I have taken against them, when the Tom-cat came to my rescue."

"In the *melee* that followed the coal-oil lamp was exploded, which accounts for the flames and the scorched condition of some of the men you see out there."

"We tried to get away from them, but they pressed us so closely we were forced to take refuge in this building."

"That's the truth, ev'ry word of it!" howled the Tom-cat. "An' the man that says 'tain't is a no-count sheep-herder! You hear me!"

"It's a lie!" vociferated Hammond, glancing defiantly at the angry faces of the horsemen.

"Whether a lie or the truth, Mr. Hammond," returned Molly, "we do not intend that you shall hang these men without judge or jury. If they fired the building purposely no doubt you can prove it. So we must ask you to step out of the way, and allow them to come out of there."

"That's the ticket!" shouted Tanner. "A

fa'r trial. We'll go bail that they won't leave town afore mornin'."

He fingered his revolver in a nervous, excited way, as he spoke, and Hammond saw that several of the horsemen seemed equally anxious for a fight.

"I appeal to you, citizens of Silver City," said Hammond, addressing the crowd that hovered expectantly on the outskirts, ready to run the instant that bullets began to fly, "is this a fair deal? We caught these men, red-handed, as you may say. They had just fired the house over there. They deserve death. Is Silver City to be placed at the mercy of such fire-bugs?"

An angry muttering came from the crowd, instigated by Hammond's adherents.

"What!" shouted Reke Tanner, wheeling his horse so that it faced the grumbling men. "Stand up fer a scoundrel like thet, do ye?"

The angry mutterings ceased, and the men fell back as if they expected him to fire on them.

"It's no use, Mr. Hammond!" said Molly, her voice firm, but her cheeks as white as ashes. "Your friends may be willing, but they're not strong enough."

"You've got the upper hand of us!" replied Hammond, with sullen anger. "We must do as you say. But, I warn those scoundrels in there that from now on it will be war to the knife, and they need expect no mercy from us."

They were ill advised words, for they served to show the real depths of his animosity; and he instantly regretted their utterance.

"Whoop!" shouted the Tom-cat, appearing at the window and throwing a kiss to Molly Mitchell. "The wimmin forever!"

He was followed by Brentwood.

"I wash my hands of the affair!" growled Hammond, walking sulkily away, an example followed by his associates. "If the people of Silver City want to be burned up in their beds by such ruffians, it's their own lookout."

The detective and the cowboy leaped to the ground, and were instantly surrounded and sheltered by the protecting horsemen.

CHAPTER XI.

THE TOM CAT AS A NARRATOR.

THE firemen had contented themselves with protecting the adjacent buildings; and when the little cavalcade, led by Molly Mitchell and the Tom-cat, started toward the town the fire had almost burned itself out. The red glare on the sky mingled with the light of the coming dawn.

The Tom-cat was evidently overcoming his diffidence, for he rode boldly by Molly's side, sitting his horse with the ease and grace of the genuine cowboy and the pride of a prince, and careless of the curious glances given him.

Only the recollections of the recent excitement enabled him to maintain that proud bearing and erect carriage. He was literally worn-out. For three days and nights he had scarcely had an hour's rest or sleep.

On reaching his room he cast himself heedlessly on the bed and at once sought the slumber so strongly demanded by overwrought brain and nerves.

When he awoke it was nearly sunset.

"Great horns!" he cried, starting up. "I've been jest a-layin' back hyer and snoozin' like a bufler in bunch-grass, the bull day! An' thar's that gal a-weepin' her eyes out fer a lovyer she thinks is dead. Plum fergot all about it this mornin'; hanged ef I didn't!"

Molly was singing away like a lark, as she moved about the living room, busy with her household duties.

"Now thar's a gal fer you!" said the Tom-cat, addressing his boot. "Lord love ye, didn't she come down on them fellers like a prairie fire! Never seen sech grit in a female."

Then a brilliant idea came to him. He would make Molly the medium by which to transmit the joyful tidings to Lily.

"Evenin', Miss Molly!" he said, stepping into the room where she was at work.

"Why, Tom-cat, is that you?" she asked, giving him a bewitching look, that went straight to the poor fellow's heart. "I thought you were asleep."

"Ho, ho, Miss Molly!" he chuckled, awkwardly fumbling his catskin cap. "Didn't think I'd snooze forever, did ye?"

He seated himself in a chair and stared at her for a moment, wondering how he ought to proceed to break the glad news.

"Won't do to blurt it out too suddint! Wimmin air skeery critters sometimes. Land o' love! what would I do ef she sh'ud faint when I told her?"

"I suppose you will be ready for supper, after your long fast?" she asked, at length, with a sly glance, remembering his cowardice on that point.

To the Tom-cat's credit be it said, however, that on two or three recent occasions, when he could see no way of avoiding it, he had taken his meals there.

"Most anybody could eat your cookin', Molly," was the rather equivocal compliment with which he parried the thrust. "But I didn't come fer feedin', though I'm hungry enough. I come to ax you some questions."

"Now, le's s'posin' a case er two. Le's s'posin', frinstance, thet you had a lovyer!"

He stared hard at her to see if the plan he had outlined as the proper one to pursue promised to work well.

"Why—why, what can you mean, Tom-cat?" asked Molly, stammering and slightly coloring.

"Thar, drat it! she's a-goin' to faint! That's what I was afeard on."

As he made this mental comment, he squared himself to spring at her should she show signs of keeling over.

Seeing that she still maintained her erect position, he gave his mental machinery another hitch, and proceeded:

"An' s'posin' at you loved him. That you loved him powerful! Harder nor a mule kin kick!"

Molly stared at the cowboy as if she could scarcely credit her ears, while the color extended until it reddened her entire face and neck.

From the first, Molly had been well aware of the cowboy's attachment; and she had, too, a rather warm feeling for this bashful and eccentric lover. She had sufficient discernment to discover the genuine diamond which lay beneath the rough exterior and to properly appreciate it.

"He is smart, if he hasn't got much education; and he wouldn't be ugly if he'd throw away that outlandish cap. But I wouldn't marry him. I wouldn't marry anybody—that is, not while father lives."

Over and over she had said this to herself when thinking of the Tom-cat, always adding the qualifying clause with a queer little thrill of regret which she could not quite understand and half-feared was wicked.

"Why, Tom-cat! What can you mean?" she asked again, giving her broom a vigorous swish to hide her agitation.

"An' s'posin'," continued the cowboy, watching her as a cat watches a mouse, "that yer father had told this hyer lovyer 'at he couldn't have ye. That in fact he had, all unbeknownst to you, promised you to another feller?"

"I should promptly tell him that my father had no right to bargain me away in that kind of style!" Molly replied, wondering what was coming next.

"Land o' love, ain't she han'some!" thought the Tom-cat, as the color receded and then came again to her round, plump cheeks.

The thought of his own absorbing passion almost drove from his mind the story he was trying to tell.

"Ef I on'y dar'd to!" he whispered, half-startled out of his wits at the bare suggestion.

"I—I sca'cly know how to tell ye what I'm tryin' to!" he exclaimed, pantingly, endeavoring to go on, but thinking much more of himself and Molly than of Lily Edgerton and her lover. "Seems as ef I'm teetotally tongue-tied this evenin'. My brain-pan rattles like a dried-up bufler-punkin'."

Molly cast him a sympathizing look that brought him at once to the verge of the precipice.

"Oh, Lordy!" he cried, clapping a hand to his mouth, as if to hold back the words that were surging for utterance. "Hang it, I e'ena'most let 'em slip that time!"

"Let what slip?" Molly inquired innocently, for the cowboy had inadvertently spoken his thoughts aloud.

He colored to the roots of his raven hair and trembled like a leaf. Then he cast an imploring glance around, and endeavored to rise from his chair. But his knees gave way and he sunk imploringly at her feet.

"I didn't intend you should know it, Miss Molly!" he cried, with a helpless wail of submission. "But I'm into the water, now, an' I can't get out. No! drat it, an' I don't want to! fer ef I don't tell ye now I'll go an' drown'd myself fer bein' the biggest fool in America."

"I'm a-lovin' you, Miss Molly, wuss'n a bumble-bee loves red clover! Thar, it's out! And I don't keer who knows it!"

A heavy step was heard in the yard, and the

cowboy scrambled back into the chair with such ludicrous haste that Molly could not keep from breaking into a loud laugh.

"Is supper 'bout ready?" asked Mitchell, coming into the room, followed by Brentwood.

"Yes!" Molly replied, hiding her merriment and confusion in the depths of the cupboard.

"I think it well to have the parties in authority open the graves and see if Curtis is really dead, before we proceed further!" said Brentwood to Mitchell, evidently continuing a conversation begun along the way.

The cowboy leaped to his feet as if shot.

"That-er-er—reminds me!" he said, flushing and stammering. "I was a-er—tryin' to tell Molly somethin' 'bout it jest a little while ago."

"About what?"

Brentwood stared as if he thought the Tom-cat bereft of his senses.

"Why, they ain't no use o' openin' any graves. Curtis is alive!"

"What makes you think so?" with a surprised look, that brought the Tom-cat at once to the point.

"I heerd Hammond say so las' night. In the buildin', ye know, afore you come. He said, an' these air his identical words: 'Fightin' Fred is in from the mount'ins, an' he reports that Clifford Curtis is a-improvin' rapidly!'"

"Why didn't you tell of this some time ago?"

"Hang it! I was so sleepy I fergot it. I was a-tryin' to tell Miss Molly, awhile ago—when, er—when you come in."

"This is important!" said Brentwood, paying no apparent heed to the cowboy's evident confusion. "Hammond had no idea the Tom-cat was listening, and he doubtless told the truth in addressing his men. Now, where is he and what are they holding him for? Those are the things we must proceed to find out."

"Where air ye goin', Molly? Hain't had supper yit, ye know."

Molly had tossed a shawl over her head, and had a hand on the knob of the door as her father spoke.

"Supper will keep better than such a piece of news as that!" she exclaimed. "I'm going to tell Lily Edgerton."

"Whoop! that's the ticket!" the Tom-cat shouted after her. "A knowlidge that her lovyer's still a-kickin' will jest chirk her up powerful!"

CHAPTER XII.

A CONSULTATION.

"YES; that's the most important piece of news we've had yet!" continued Brentwood, staring thoughtfully after Molly, as she ran lightly down the trail. "What other information, Tom-cat, dropped into your long ears while you were concealed behind that door?"

Thus questioned, the cowboy gave a succinct account of all he had heard and seen while shadowing Hank Hammond and the members of the Silver Circle.

"That only confirms what I have thought for several days!" mused the detective, speaking aloud. "This Hammond is at the head of some scoundrelly organization, having for its main purpose the getting and holding of the Edgerton Mine. I was convinced of it as soon as Hammond produced those papers and took forcible possession of the property."

"There are several things about the affair, however, that puzzle me. It seems clear, to my mind at least, that Hammond intends and expects the early execution of the Gold King. Probably he has been watching for an opportunity to grasp the property, and when Edgerton shot Curtis he took advantage of his arrest and imprisonment to put his scheme into effect."

"It may be, however, that he acted simply on the spur of the moment, thinking it too good a chance to be lost."

"Now, my idea is, that he or some of his men were not far away when the shooting occurred. Curtis was not killed, as we now know, though Edgerton no doubt believed and still believes him dead."

"If Curtis is not dead then the Gold King cannot be hanged for murder. So they bore the wounded man away to enable them to carry out the theory that he had been slain. The report of his murder was spread, and to make the play more realistic they had a mock funeral in the early hours of the morning, at which only Hammond's friends and supporters were present."

"That is why the alleged funeral was held at so unseemly an hour."

"Why they didn't kill the young man outright and use his body as conclusive evidence against Edgerton, I can't say. The wickedest

men have, at times, a horror of deliberate murder. Should they slay him in cold blood and their plot become in some way revealed it might go hard with them. In the present case, supposing my theory to be correct, they could produce the young man alive, if pressed to the wall, and probably escape with comparatively light sentences.

"When they had disposed of Curtis and secured the incarceration of Edgerton on the charge of murder, then they were ready to present the second act in the drama.

"Forged papers were prepared and published to the world and the Edgerton Mine was seized by the strong arm of might. When the Gold King is dead nothing will stand in the way of their complete triumph, except the life of a young woman who is now bowed and bruised like a crushed flower."

Brentwood rested his head in his hands and for a long time stared at the floor in silence.

"Edgerton is an old fool!" he said, at last, bitterly. "His obstinacy and pig-headedness is playing him right into the hands of these fellows.

"And then the idea of a man attempting to coerce his daughter in that kind of style! And then shooting her lover because of a secret meeting which he in reality forced upon them. His high mightiness disgusted me when I called on him; and the more I think of it the worse I am disgusted. No wonder that Lily does not care to visit him. What daughter could honor and respect such a father?"

"Now ye'r a-talkin'!" said the Tom-cat, breaking silence for the first time since Molly's departure.

Brentwood looked up, as if recalled by the words.

"We will have our hands full of work for the next few days. I suppose, Tom-cat, you are sufficiently rested to take the trail again?"

"Some more o' the shadder bizness, eh?" with an impatient shrug.

"Why I thought you rather liked it."

Brentwood laughed at sight of the cowboy's gruesome face.

"Not when it's chasin' a steam engine like that air Hammond. That feller don't give himself any rest, sca'cely. An' as fer sleep, I don't believe he takes two good winks in a week."

"Well, I'll not ask you to follow Hammond this time. We must find out where Clifford Curtis is concealed. Somewhere in the mountains, I believe you said."

"Them war the identical words."

"The mountains cover a good deal of territory in this corner of the planet, so the trail is not a very plain one up to that point."

"The only instructions I can give you will be general. If Clifford Curtis is held somewhere in the mountains there is some sort of communication kept up between the gang that is detaining him and the members of the Silver Circle here."

"That is proven by Hammond's statement that Fighting Fred was in from the mountains with a report."

"Them war the identical words!" the Tom-cat again asserted, solemnly.

"Then I think your first movement should be to hunt up this Fighting Fred, as they call him. When you have once found him, don't lose sight of him a minute until you have trailed him to this lair in the mountains."

"I kin do it!" asserted the cowboy. "He'll have to be a cross between a weasel an' a bird of he slips away from me after I onc't clap my peepers onto him."

"I can trust you to do the work correctly!" said Brentwood, with an approving smile.

"Now, of course, you can't be in every place at once!"

"He kin come as nigh it as the next 'un!" declared Mitchell, who had until now, been a silent listener.

"Yes; but no one can do that! Our friend, Mitchell here, can assist you in keeping a lookout for Fighting Fred. And Reke Tanner could also give you valuable aid."

"Thet we kin!" cried Mitchell, emphasizing the statement by a stamp of his heavy boot.

"Then we will consider that part of the programme settled. I will give all the help I can, and may even find time to assist in trailing the scamp into the mountains."

"My especial work, however, must be to add fuel to the fire that I am trying to kindle here in Silver City."

"I already have some of the best men in the town on my side. Not one of them will lift a finger to aid the Gold King, but they are all willing to stand by the Gold King's daughter in a fight for her own."

"I am adding converts to my theory every day; and like a rolling snowball the movement gathers bulk and force at each revolution."

"I want to organize a company of determined men, men of fighting caliber, that I can pit successfully against any force Hammond may bring into the field."

"I want to do this, and do it quickly for two reasons."

"The first is that Edgerton's trial for murder will not occur for more than two months; and I believe that Hammond will grow desperate before that time and storm the jail with a mob. If he does I must be ready to meet force with force."

"The second reason is that if it becomes known that I am gaining strong and influential backers, it will have a tendency to awe and hold in check the turbulent scamps who would otherwise flock to Hammond's standard for the sake of the plunder to be gained thereby."

"In my rounds to-day I discovered that Hammond rather lost his grip last night by his actions at the mine buildings."

"How's that?" Mitchell questioned.

"He showed his hand too plainly! People are not all fools, by a good deal, and his pretenses were altogether too transparent. There are not many skulls so thick, but that an inkling of the truth worked its way through them."

"The town is like a tinder-box, now. The least spark is liable to start a conflagration that could only be quenched in blood. There are rumors and counter rumors; and nothing is too marvelous to be believed."

"So, you see, I have to work carefully. I don't want to precipitate a conflict, for I find that Hammond has hosts of adherents. And they are generally desperate men. All I want to do is to keep his men cowed into a semblance of submission, until Clifford Curtis can be produced."

"That will relieve Edgerton of the charge of murder; and when that is done, I believe Hammond will acknowledge himself whipped and give up the fight."

"I hope so!" said the old man with a sigh, for the troubles of his friends pressed him sorely.

"Hyer comes Miss Molly!" announced the Tom-cat.

His eyes had scarcely left the trail a moment during the entire time of her absence.

"Hookey, I'm glad of it, fer I'm holler plum down to the heels o' my boots. I reckon, too, that that little angel over yender's a-feelin' some'at better by reason o' the good news Molly brung her."

Molly came in, flushed and heated by her rapid walk.

"Oh, father!" she exclaimed, as she began to clatter among the dishes. "It would have done your heart good to have seen Lily when I told her that Cliff was certainly alive!"

"No doubt! no doubt!" said the simple-hearted miner, slowly knocking the ashes from his pipe into the palm of his hand. "Sech news is enough to make anybody feel ruther spry and chipper!"

CHAPTER XIII.

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE.

"Oh, Miss Molly! Oh, my dear missus! Oh! Oh!"

A fat negress waddled hastily up the path leading to the Mitchell residence. She was frightened and excited, and she alternately clasped her pudgy hands and rolled her eyes heavenward, while from her lips issued a series of moans, broken sentences and ejaculations.

It was the morning of the second day after the conversation detailed in the last chapter.

Molly Mitchell, good-natured and rosy as usual, was beginning preparations for breakfast.

When she saw the hysterical negress rolling up the path, she dropped the tea-kettle with a thud that shook the house and threatened the destruction of that useful utensil. Then, heedless of the flood of boiling water that gushed out onto the carpet, she rushed to the door to meet the panting woman.

The negress was one of the Edgerton servants, and Molly divined at once that something startling had occurred.

"What's the matter, Deely?" she asked, as the negress puffed and panted up the path.

"Oh, Miss Molly! Oh, my missus! Oh! Oh! Dis am a drefful country! I was nebbber done to' up so in my life afo'! May de Good Master sabe us!"

She sunk down in the doorway, wringing her hands and moaning piteously.

"Can't you tell what's the matter?" Molly de-

manded, giving her a half-angry shake. "Has anything happened to Lily?"

"Oh, Miss Molly, she's done gone!"

"Gone?"

"Yes, Miss Molly. W'en I done clambd up to 'er sleepin'-room 'wile ergo she was done gone! Oh, oh! May de Lawd presarb us!"

The negress commenced to rock herself to and fro, in the desolation of her distress, and Molly saw that it would be a waste of precious time to attempt to extract further information from her.

No other person was in the house except John Mitchell, who was snoring soundly, utterly oblivious of all earthly trials and tribulations. The thud of the falling tea-kettle and the excited conversation had not in the least disturbed him.

"It would take an earthquake to wake father up," Molly exclaimed, as she ran to the door of his sleeping-room and commenced to pound on it, at the same time shouting at the top of her voice.

"Eb, eh? What is it? Another fire?"

John Mitchell sat up so quickly that he almost rolled out of bed; and then began hurriedly to dress before he fairly comprehended who it was that was calling to him.

When he came out of the room Molly was again laboring with the fat negress, vainly trying to extract some further bits of information.

"Lily was not in her room this morning when Deely went to call her!" said Molly, turning to her father. "I'm afraid something awful has happened."

"I'm going over there now, and will you hunt up Mr. Brentwood and the Tom-cat and send them there just as quick's you ever can? They were out all night last night."

She threw a shawl about her shoulders, clapped a sun-hat on her head, and darted away without waiting to see that her requests were carried out.

"Better hustle over there," said Mitchell, to the moaning negress. "Mebbe Molly'll want ye fer somethin'. 'Sides, I'm goin' to lock up the house now and go over into town."

"Oh, oh! Marse Mitchell, do you reckon Miss Lily's dead, er been toted away?"

"Carried off, I cal'late," replied Mitchell, buckling on his cartridge-belt.

Then he locked the door, and the negress waddled slowly homeward, moaning and wringing her hands.

When Molly reached the home of the Edgertons she found the greatest confusion prevailing. The servants were doing little save rushing from room to room in a wild and distracted search. They had covered the same territory a half dozen times already, and were now again peering into every little nook and cranny where a cat could scarcely find concealment.

One of them had tried to convey the startling news to the Gold King, but had been refused admittance to the jail; hence, now, they scarcely knew what to do.

"Oh, Miss Molly," one of them exclaimed, coming quickly forward. "I'm so glad you've come. We're jist that tore up that we're a'most crazy."

Without stopping to ask many questions, Molly requested to be led to Lily's room.

The snowy bed was undisturbed, showing that it had not been occupied the preceding night. Nothing indicated that any violent struggle had taken place. The window was open, and the cool air from the mountains toyed with the curtains. Everything bore the sign of peace and quietude.

"Was the window open that way?" Molly asked, of the huddling group of servants that had followed her.

"Jist that way when we first come to the room this mornin'" was the answer. "Miss Lily was seen a-settin' there, with the winder open and her head drooped forrard on the winder-sill, on'y a little while afore we went to bed las' night. An' that's the last we ever seen of her."

A knock at the front door was followed by the entrance of Mitchell, Brentwood and the Tom-cat. Without ceremony they came up to Lily Edgerton's sleeping apartment.

"Rather startling news!" was Brentwood's greeting, a serious look on his earnest face.

Then he proceeded to question the servants; eliciting at first only the information detailed.

Then a question accidentally developed the fact that Lily had had a caller the previous day, and that the caller was none other than Hammond.

"You are sure the fellow was Hank Hammond, the gambler?"

"It's the feller that's took possession of the

mine, anyway!" was the reply. "I mightn't 'a' knowed him if I hadn't 'a' seen him down there the other day."

"Then we need not look further to find the author of this mysterious disappearance!" said the detective, his active mind leaping at once to a theory.

"Does any one know why he visited the young lady?"

None of the servants could even hazard a guess.

"Of course I cannot be positive, but I believe I can see through the scoundrel's little game!" said Brentwood, taking our friends to one side for the purpose of discussing the situation.

"The death of the Gold King will leave no one between Hammond and the fortune he covets except Lily Edgerton. Now the probabilities are that he came here yesterday to see how her misfortunes had affected her, and to ascertain whether or not she is likely to sink under the weight of misery he has been assisting to heap upon her."

"Finding her bearing up more buoyantly than he expected, he determined to abduct her and hold her a prisoner until after her father's death, and probably for an indefinite time. Possibly a letter will be sent back from some Eastern city, stating that she has left the country of her own accord."

"When the Gold King is hanged, as he will be if Clifford Curtis is not produced, Hammond will dispose of his alleged rights in the Edgerton Mine, or at least manage in some way to enrich himself and his followers out of it. Then they will release Lily Edgerton and permit her to return to a broken home and a shattered inheritance. It is one of the most diabolical plots I have ever run across in all my detective experience!"

"They went out this way!" the Tom-cat announced.

He had his head thrust out of the window, and had been closely examining the ground below and the outside of the building.

"Thar's a ravelin' o' rope a-stickin' onto that stan; and thar's footprints below as plain as ef a steer had been trompin' around."

Brentwood came at once to the window and ran his eyes over the tell-tale signs.

"You are right, Tom-cat! I thought they had gone out that way."

A few threads of grass-rope hung to a sharp projection just below the window-ledge. A rope had evidently passed over that projection; and the friction had worn the threads loose and detached them.

"They came in and went out of this window by means of a rope!" said the detective. "Let's go below. Perhaps we may learn something from the foot-marks."

He hurried down with the Tom-cat, and they soon stood in the yard beneath the window.

The imprints of feet were not very plain; although the cowboy had asserted that it looked as if a steer had been "trompin'" around.

But then the Tom-cat was used to deciphering such indications, and his eyes were trained to detect and understand the slightest depressions in the surface of the soil. Many a time had he followed a herd of stampeding cattle through the inky blackness of a stormy night by occasionally dismounting and feeling about on the prairie with his fingers.

"Thar was two o' the skunks mixed up in this thing!" he said, kneeling and closely scrutinizing the tell-tale signs.

"Hyer's where they tromped around. Hyer's where they come in toward the house; and hyer's where they went back. Now, ef you'll look ruther clost, you kin see that when they come in they wasn't carryin' nothin' hefty. Their boot-heels didn't sink into the s'ile, sca'ce-ly. When they went back one on 'em had a load; fer his boot-heels cut into the grass nearly a half an inch. That load c'u'dn't 'a' been anybody 'cept Miss Edgerton!"

Brentwood could see the marks clearly, and the differences in the depressions, now that they were pointed out by the cowboy, and he knew that the reasoning was correct.

"Do you think you can follow them?" he asked.

"Depends!" said the Tom-cat. "Ef they tuck to the street where it's beat down an' packed, and where grass jest can't grow, then I couldn't foller. Ef they tuck to a traveled trail, I mout do somethin' by watchin' the p'int at which they left it; that is, s'posin' they sh'u'd leave it at all. Ef they tuck to the mesa or the mountain I'd have as easy a thing as I'd want, barrin' water and rocky places."

"Then follow that trail!" said Brentwood, earnestly. "Take a horse if you need it. If it

leads to the open country, come back, and we will join you in force."

"They have carried Lily Edgerton to their mountain lair, probably—wherever it is. I sighted Fighting Fred awhile ago, and I'll put a shadow after him. I will proceed to get things in readiness for a prompt movement, should you find the trail an open one."

Without further words, the Tom-cat glided away through the shrubbery; and Brentwood turned back into the house to inform John and Molly Mitchell of the extent of their discoveries and the movements which would probably follow.

CHAPTER XIV.

A VILLAINOUS DEED.

"We'd better take to the river here, my good Pedro! Our excellent friend, the detective, and that delightfully original fellow, the Texas Tom-cat, will be after us, hot-footed, in a few hours."

"We're the boys, Pedro, when there's any clever work to be done. I think we managed this little trick to perfection. Now we must see that we cover our tracks with equal skill."

"When her ladyship revives—which she will not do for some time, however, thanks to the potency of that drugged handkerchief—we must be a good many miles away. Then if she wants to wail her woes to the rocky wilderness, why, let her wail!"

Bonanza Bill laughed a short, hard laugh, that had in it very little merriment, but a great deal of malicious triumph.

Pedro, the Mexican, bore the senseless form of Lily Edgerton in his strong and sinewy arms.

They had halted on the banks of the little mountain stream, a short distance below the Edgerton Mine buildings.

From beneath a collection of drift, Bonanza Bill drew a broad, flat-bottomed boat; and in it Pedro deposited his burden.

"Take the steering paddle, Pedro!" drawled the scoffing villain, seating himself lazily in the prow. "The current will carry us as fast as we will care to go, and you're better with a blade of any kind than I am."

Pedro showed his teeth in acknowledgment of the compliment and took the place assigned him. The boat swung out into the stream, was caught by the arrowy current and tossed onward with feathery fleetness.

The gray dawn had not yet touched the leaden Eastern skies when they concealed the boat at a point some ten miles below Silver City, and struck off into the mountains.

When Pedro again lifted Lily Edgerton in his sinewy arms, she showed signs of returning consciousness. She sighed lightly, her eyelids fluttered, and a little later she opened her eyes.

"So, her ladyship is coming back from the land of bright visions and sweet dreams! The land ruled over by the 'Sand Man' of our youthful story-books, you know. I hope she'll enjoy the change from fancy to reality; but I doubt it."

That mocking, cruel voice fell on Lily Edgerton's waking ears like the knell of doom.

She lifted her head, with a startled cry, and attempted to struggle from Pedro's grasp.

"No use, my dear," said Bonanza Bill, bowing low, as her gaze fell upon him. "We reverence women as we reverence angels; but we couldn't let even an angel go, under the present circumstances. Eh, Pedro?"

His big, black eyes burned with an evil light, and that cruel sneer seemed to transform him into the semblance of a mocking fiend.

"It's bitter as medicine, no doubt; but medicine must be taken sometimes. We have our orders, and our account at the banker's would be seriously curtailed if we failed to carry them out. So, you see, my dear, how it is yourself."

Lily shuddered with fear and disgust, but she was determined to know their designs and destination.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked, ceasing her ineffectual struggles.

"Just on a little pleasure jaunt into the mountains, where we can keep you safely until we mutually tire of each other's society. We feared you might not come willingly, so we were sufficiently ungallant to bring you, without so much as saying, 'By your leave.' But our intentions are good; and we know your kind heart will not allow you to entertain ill-feeling toward any one."

Pedro had grown tired of his burden; and thinking he might safely rest until his superior got through talking, he placed the girl upon her feet in front of a large rock, and coolly sat down before her.

As might have been expected, Lily, freed from the restraining arms, made a heedless dash for liberty.

Bonanza Bill caught her and jerked her backward with a force and harshness that contrasted sharply with the general smoothness of his words and manner.

"Move on with her, Pedro!" he commanded. Then, dropping back into his customary banter:

"We shall have to insist on the pleasure of your company for the remainder of our journey, my dear Miss Edgerton. Sorry to disappoint you, but you would have found the way quite rough and stony; much rougher and stonier than the trail we are now following."

Pedro staggered on with his burden for another half-mile. Then they reached a sort of *cul de sac*, thickly set and screened with bushes. Into this the trail vanished.

"Now, you can walk!" said Pedro, again placing her upon her feet. "You can't get out of this pocket unless you fly!"

"Which, with all her angelic graces and accomplishments, she can't do, Pedro! I'll wager my interest in the estate back yonder on that!"

"What do you intend to do with me?" cried Lily, driven frantic by the terrors of her situation. "Help! Help! Oh, won't some one come to help me!"

The cries were answered by an evil-faced man, who poked his head through the fringe of bushes and then advanced, greeting Bonanza Bill servilely.

"What's up, boss? Bringin' another bird fer the cage?"

Lily caught at the suggestion conveyed by the last question.

Was it possible that Cliff was in the gloomy cavern to which she was being led?

The thought gave her renewed hope; and when she was left alone in a dark and solitary wing of the cave, she beat helplessly against the strong walls and shouted her lover's name again and again, until she sunk down in utter exhaustion.

For two days she was left there, without other companionship than that of the squeaking and fluttering bats. So great was her fright and terror that she feared her brain was giving way.

Each morning, the heavy door that barred her from the outer world grated upon its hinges and a hand conveying water and food was thrust through the opening.

Day and night were very much alike to her. The grayish gloom of the one changed into the inky blackness of the other, and the ghoul-like bats squeaked and fluttered their leathery wings more horribly; that was all.

On the evening of the second day, the heavy door was flung open and Hammond strode in. His face was flushed and angry; and he seemed to be consuming his strength with impotent rage.

"Of course you know that I had you brought here, Miss Edgerton!" he said abruptly. "And no doubt, you have surmised that it was not done without a purpose. I intend you no harm, and pledge you my honor that no harm shall be done you!"

There was a suggestive emphasis on the last word that Lily could not fail to note.

"If you had signed that paper I presented to you the other day there would have been none of this. I would also have secured your father's release."

"I could not sign away my claims to the Edgerton Mine on the bare promise of any man!" she said, retreating slowly before his angry gaze.

"Very well! We will see if there is not a way to make you. Bring him in here, Pedro!"

The Mexican instantly obeyed by driving into the half-lighted apartment, Lily's lover, Clifford Curtis. One arm was suspended in a sling; the other was bound to his back; and the noose of Pedro's lariat was about his neck.

With a wild, convulsive cry, Lily sprang forward and fell upon his neck, embracing him and sobbing as if her heart would break.

Curtis could only stoop forward and press his lips to her cheeks and endeavor to murmur some words of hope and consolation.

"Oh, Cliff!" she cried, "and are you really alive and before me?"

"Yes; but he will not be long, unless you do what I say!" Hammond exclaimed harshly.

"I suppose I may witness this little drama?" said Bonanza Bill, slipping through the door, which had been left wide open.

"Yes; and you may tell the rest of the boys to come in!" replied the chief. "Curtis is a little heavy."

"Now, Miss Edgerton!" turning again to the trembling girl, as the men filed in. "On your own action depends the life of Clifford Curtis. If you will sign this paper, I will release both you and him. If not, I will hang him to the brace you see above you."

"Oh, no, no!" cried the unhappy girl, striving to slip the noose from her lover's neck.

"Here is the paper!" producing it and at the same time stamping the ground angrily. "And here are pen and ink. Sign and you can both go."

"He is lying!" whispered Curtis. "I can see it in his eyes. He will not dare to hang me."

"Will you sign it or not?" shouted the enraged chief.

"I can answer for her!" said Curtis, hotly. "She will not!"

"Up with the dog!" screamed Hammond, his eyes blazing. "We'll choke that black tongue out of him."

"It's to be a case of suspended animation I see!" said Bonanza, coolly, as Pedro tossed the end of the rope over the beam.

Lily gave a scream of fright and clung convulsively to her lover, as the rope tightened and she was drawn slowly upward.

CHAPTER XV.

BETRAYED BY A DOG.

WHEN Brentwood walked into Silver City, that morning, after starting the Tom-cat on the trail of Lily Edgerton's abductors, almost the first men he saw were Hank Hammond and Fighting Fred.

The sight of the former quite upset his calculations; for he had felt certain Hammond was one of the men who had carried Lily Edgerton away.

They were passing into a saloon; and the detectives stepped into a building opposite for the purpose of watching their movements.

"If Hammond had any hand in the affair, then Miss Edgerton is concealed somewhere in or near Silver City. Probably the abduction was the work of subordinate acting under his instructions."

"Any way, Fighting Fred has not yet returned to their mountain lair; and I don't think time will be lost by shadowing them. The task will be easy, if they stick together. If they separate!"

His eyes roved up and down the street, as if in quest of some one.

"Hello, there's Reke Tanner!"

The miner was strolling leisurely along and soon came in front of the window behind which the detective had ensconced himself.

An almost imperceptible tap on the glass caused Tanner to look around.

He could see no one; but was shrewd enough to conceal his surprise and walk carelessly into the store.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" as he caught sight of Brentwood. "I knowed in reason somebody wanted me to come in hyer, fer that tap didn't sound like 'twas made by acks'dent!"

"Get in behind here!" ordered Brentwood, motioning him to a seat. "We want to see and not be seen, just now. Could you do a little piece of work in the interest of the Gold King's daughter?"

"You may jest bet I c'u'd!" Tanner replied, earnestly.

Then the detective told him of Lily Edgerton's abduction—at which news his astonishment and anger were unbounded.

"Hammond and Fighting Fred went into that saloon a little while ago, and I stepped in here to watch them; they must be followed. One man can't do the work, for the chances are that they will separate. Now I want you to keep the fighting gentleman in sight all day, and all night, if necessary. If he holes permanently, report at once to Molly Mitchell."

"I will shadow the king-pin of these gentry, and if he throws me off the scent he will be shrewder than I think he is."

The pair came out of the saloon at that moment, and separated, as the detective had feared they would. Hammond walked rapidly up the street, and Fighting Fred strolled leisurely away in the other direction.

"Remember my instructions!" whispered Brentwood. "Don't let him escape you!"

Then he stepped into the street and commenced his silent and relentless chase after the chief of the Silver Circle.

Hammond seemed to have a great deal of business to transact that day. He visited every saloon and gambling resort in the town; and tramped about as tireless as an automaton.

But he could not exhaust the earnest and determined man who hung so persistently at his heels.

"He is evidently rallying his men for some movement!" mused Brentwood, as he pretended to examine an array of articles hanging in a show-window, while covertly watching Hammond, who was conversing with some cronies a block away. "I don't seem to be making much progress toward the discovery of Lily Edgerton; but I will have to trust to Tom-cat for that. He is a regular bloodhound, on the trail. This Hammond evidently needs watching, and I must stay with him."

Along in the afternoon Hammond went to his rooms, doubtless to obtain needed rest and sleep. He did not emerge until after dark; when Brentwood again commenced his persistent dogging.

Just before midnight, the chief of the Silver Circle left the town and started for the Edgerton Mine buildings. One of these he entered; and Brentwood, who was not far in his rear, crept up to the wall, in a listening attitude.

The low hum of voices and subdued shuffling of feet showed that the night-hawks owning Hammond's sway, had gathered in force.

They were in a dimly-lighted inner room, which Brentwood found it impossible to reach without imminent danger of discovery. Profiting by their previous experience they had sentinels posted in every room and hall in anyway connected with, or leading to this inner apartment. Evidently they did not intend to be caught napping a second time.

Twice Brentwood circled the house, with cat-like steps, seeking an unguarded opening. Then he stooped down and began an examination of the foundation.

This promised better results. Near the front steps he found a hole which a dog had evidently burrowed in chase of a rabbit. By a little work he enlarged this, and crept under the house.

The hum of voices and shuffling of feet directed him; and he was soon beneath the room occupied by Hammond and his followers.

He had scarcely settled himself comfortably when the humming and shuffling ceased. Hammond was rising to speak.

"Our good friend, Brentwood, endeavors to stick closer to us than a brother!" said the silver chief, with an attempt at grim pleasantry. "I discovered that he was following me this afternoon. I gave him the shake to-night, however, and he is now, no doubt, stumbling around the alleys of Silver City and improving his temper by barking his shins."

A hearty laugh followed the statement. "I'm glad you think so," Brentwood smilingly mused.

"I was shaddered, too, boss!" said a rough and heavy voice.

"Fighting Fred!" gasped the detective. "Then Tanner must be not far off."

"Ole Reke Tanner 'tempted the spotter bizness with me—to his sorrow!"

"You didn't kill him?" Hammond eagerly asked.

"Nô!" with a grating laugh. "I wouldn't be idjit enough to go fer to do that. But I jest laid fer the ole fool, and when he come up I give 'im a love-tap that keeled 'im over. He ain't hurt, he ain't. Tanner's got a head like a billy-goat. He'll have a lump onto it, though, 'bout the size o' a goose-egg, er my name ain't Fredrick!"

"So Tanner's out of the chase!" Brentwood muttered.

"I'm afraid we're making progress backward, like a crawfish," continued Hammond. "I've commenced a game, though, that I think will pull us through."

"You know we've got this property, and only Lily Edgerton stands in the way of our holding it. I'm negotiating now with a fellow who is willing to come in as an 'innocent purchaser' and take it off our hands. That will at least throw the matter into the courts, for our 'innocent purchaser' will of course make a big battle for his own."

"The Gold King's trial will be postponed for another two months, I understand. Probably it will be put off longer."

"Now, I am afraid this detective will have some kind of action instituted in favor of the daughter. That might reveal everything."

"To prevent that, I visited Miss Edgerton and tried to get her to transfer her rights to me, under threats. The threats didn't work, and I had her carried away."

"I intend to circulate the report that she has left the country, and will also, if possible, secure papers and letters from her, confirming my statements and claims."

"She is now at the cave, and I propose to

wring these from her by threatening the life of Cliff Curtis.

"That will head off this bloodhound, I'm thinking. With Miss Edgerton absent and papers in my hands, the genuineness of which none can deny, showing a voluntary release and transfer to me for a valuable consideration of all her rights and interests, Brentwood will find himself powerless."

"But what ef she won't sign 'em, boss!" queried Fighting Fred.

"Then we'll remove her from our path!"

The cold-blooded heartlessness with which this was uttered caused even Brentwood's iron nerves to quiver.

"We must hold this property by hook or crook for at least six months. Then it will not be worth possessing. I am increasing the working force. In that time we will skin the cream from the ore-bed. Run on credit, as far as we can. Increase the force to enable us to take out and dispose of two hundred thousand in bullion. Fight off suits for possession in the way I have indicated; and in six months' time we can leave here with well-lined pockets."

Fighting Fred now got on his feet and backed up his chief with a speech in a similar strain. Then every man in the room, almost, had to unburden himself of his ideas and opinions; and it was long past midnight when an adjournment was proposed.

One of the men was accompanied by a little dog, which had for some time been sniffing suspiciously about the room.

When they filed out of the building this dog darted to the hole by the side of the steps and set up a furious barking.

"Hello!" exclaimed Hammond. "There seems to be something under there."

Then with a flash of suspicion:

"We'll have to investigate it. Maybe it's Brentwood, or one of his infernal spies!"

"Well, now, ef I don't jest eternally crack his neck, ef it is!" declared Fighting Fred, kneeling down and applying an eye to the aperture.

CHAPTER XVI.

A DIFFICULT TRAIL.

THE Tom-cat experienced very little trouble in trailing Lily's abductors as far as the river. They had made several twists and some attempts at concealment, but these did not worry or baffle the cowboy.

When the river was reached, however, the trail abruptly ended.

"They've tuck to a boat!" said the Tom-cat, looking up and down and across the stream. "Might as well try to foller a bird as a boat. But I'll try it. A bird's got to light some time, and a boat can't go on allus 'thout touchin' the shore."

Evidently his disgust was great.

For some time he searched around in hopes of finding another skiff; for he could see by the marks on the sand that a skiff had been used.

There were a few boats stowed away in one of the mine buildings, as he knew from previous inspection. But the day shift of workmen were gathering, and he dared not attempt to purloin one.

"They're jest a-layin' there a-crackin' their jints open in the sun!" he exclaimed pathetically. "I don't 'low, though, that the gen'leman what's now a-runnin' that instertution would loan me one, considerin'!"

"Now the fellers that rustled this young heifer either went down the crick er acrost it. It's tough pullin' up-stream, an' they could make faster time that way afoot."

He rolled a light log into the river, tied his revolvers and cartridge-belt about his neck, seated himself astride the log, and picked up a piece of plank to use as a paddle.

"Ef this craft turns under me, them weepins 'll be apt to hold my head down an' my beels up!" he muttered, grimly. "But, hang it, I've got to resk somethin'. Can't snoop aroun' hyer all day."

He pushed his ungainly craft into the stream and commenced to work it slowly across. Then the swift current caught it, and he had all he could do to keep his position and prevent the log from rolling.

More than once he thought he would be compelled to abandon it, together with his weapons, and swim for the nearest shore.

By almost superhuman exertions he at last freed it from the suction of the arrowy center and drove it into the calmer waters near the further shore. But the torrent had carried him a long distance below the point at which he wished to land.

On reaching the rocky bank he turned the log

adrift and scrambled out, carefully holding his weapons and cartridges high above his head.

"Now I've got to walk back to the pint I aimed fer!" he growled. "They may have come straight across. Like enough they didn't; but in this kind o' bizness it won't do to depend on guess-work."

It was a toilsome scramble back along the rocky and precipitous banks. He had drifted at least a half-mile down-stream, and every inch of the shore had to be closely scrutinized.

The search revealed that the abductors had not landed anywhere along there, and he hurried back to his starting-point.

"Twar wimmin as fu'st fotched trouble into the world and they're boun' not to break the record!" he exclaimed, as he continued on down the stream.

Then a reproachful pang shot through him as he recalled the fact that Molly was a woman.

"Some wimmin!" he corrected. "An' come to think on't I don't know as it's the wimmin's fault. The Lord made 'em han'some an' purty an' smart an' put 'em in the way o' temptation an' sich; an' I don't 'low they kin rightly be held a'countable fer it."

"An' then there's so many all-fired p'izen critters goin' around in the shape o' men a-gittin' the wimmin into trouble, an' a-abductin' of 'em an' a-carryin' 'em off, that it's eternally makin' trouble fer the men as admires 'em an' tries to love 'em honest."

He pulled his catskin cap over his eyes, as if to shut out these disagreeable thoughts, and picked his way slowly on down the stream, narrowly watching every wave-washed pebble and every bit of shifting sand.

The way was so rough and difficult that it took him until mid-afternoon to cover a distance of six miles.

"It may be that they jest took to the crick to throw me off the trail," he mused, as he stopped at a rocky bend to rest and think over the situation. "Praps they paddled aroun' a little, then landed at the startin'-p'int and back-tracked it to town. 'Twould be a rather 'cute trick, an' li'ble to fool the best o' em."

"I don't know as I need to worry 'bout that, though, long's Brentwood's foreman o' that eend o' the round-up. Ef they're a-roostin' some'eres in the town an' he can't diskiver 'em, 'twouldn't be much use fer me to try."

"He said to come back an' report when I found anything; but I ain't found nothin' yit."

A little further down-stream he discovered an abandoned and leaky boat.

"Jest the thing," he cried, freeing it from the drift in which it had lodged. "I've been figgerin' on gittin' back across this dratted branch for some sime. Mebbe them abductors landed on the same side they come in at. Ef they did, I want to know it afore goin' any further down this-a-way."

The boat was so rotten and leaky that it seemed tempting fate to trust one's self in it. But the Tom-cat was a thoroughly reckless character, when it appeared that anything might be gained by recklessness.

So he pushed the boat into the rapid river, using a piece of drift for a paddle, and turned the prow boldly toward the center of the current. The water poured in through the crevices in threatening torrents, but he worked heroically at the paddle, and succeeded in landing the leaky craft, when it seemed just on the point of sinking.

"Twar better than a log, anyhow," he exclaimed, leaping out and dragging the nose of the boat up on the sand. "I'll throw a stun in it to keep it from floatin' away, an' let it lay there till it soaks its sides together. Nobody kin see it in this bend, unless they come huntin' fur it on purpose."

Having thus anchored the boat to his satisfaction, he proceeded up the river, closely scanning every little nook and bend where a boat could by any possibility have been landed.

Night found him thus engaged, and forced him to forego the completion of the task until morning.

The next day he finished his search up the river, without discovering anything; and then retraced his way to the boat.

As he had anticipated the soaking had closed its joints and seams and it was now, in spite of its rotting timbers, quite a safe and navigable craft.

Crossing in it to the other side, he weighted it again with a stone and continued on down the river.

So much time had been lost in the futile search up the stream that it was now, past noon.

While thus plodding on, he was startled by seeing a light boat shoot past him. It contained

Hank Hammond, and he was using a pair of oars to assist the rapid current.

The Tom-cat could scarcely repress an exclamation of surprise. Hammond had not seen him; and he sunk noiselessly out of sight behind a rock.

The silver chief seemed only intent on urging his light craft down the stream at as rapid a rate as possible; and looked neither to the right nor to the left.

"Whoop! Mariar!"

The Tom-cat could not restrain these subdued notes of exultation.

"It's the ole king-pin hisself. He's a-goin' to that 'air hole in the mountains, wharever it is; an' I'm goin' along er bu'st!"

He hurried after the boat at a surprising rate of speed, considering the difficulties of the way.

Of course he could not keep up with the flying skiff; but he managed to hold it in view by making an occasional survey of its position from some rocky prominence.

Presently he saw Hammond head in toward shore.

Knowing that he intended to land, the cowboy broke into a wild run that brought him again in sight of Hammond, just as the latter was lifting the boat from the water for the purpose of concealing it.

When he struck off into the hills the cowboy was hanging to his trail with the persistency of a bloodhound.

A forty minutes' scramble brought them to the cavern, hid away in the busy and lonely *cul de sac*.

Into this pocket the cowboy dared not venture until the kindly twilight brought its protection and shelter. Then he crept forward, penetrated the fringe of bushes and crawled slowly through the mouth of the cave.

The cave seemed a net-work of passages branching off from one central chamber; and the Tom-cat was at a loss how to proceed until the sound of voices guided him.

Crawling into the passage from which the voices came, the light of the declining sun as it sifted in grayly and faintly through some far-away rifts, revealed a startling spectacle.

Hammond and his band of miscreants were gathered about Lily Edgerton and her lover; and the latter was being drawn slowly upward by the tightening lariat.

Flesh and blood could not stand it. At least not such flesh and blood as the Tom-cat boasted.

His revolver was in his hand instantly. A bullet cut the rope above the head of the gasping man; and, with a series of screeches that would have done credit to a tribe of wildcats, he bounded into the chamber.

CHAPTER XVII.

TIMELY AID.

WHEN Fighting Fred peered under the building, Brentwood shielded his eyes so that their shining might not betray him.

"Don't see nothin'!" said the burly rascal.

"Must be a badger er a rabbit."

As the dog continued its anxious whining and scratching, Hammond urged his subordinate to crawl under the building and investigate the matter.

This Fighting Fred readily agreed to, for he really believed that some animal had sought refuge under the house. Bold and reckless as he always was, he would not have risked his life by crawling thus upon a concealed enemy.

Brentwood almost held his breath when he saw the man place a gleaming knife in his teeth and crawl slowly into the opening.

His only safety lay in inducing a continuance of the belief; so he wriggled softly behind the protecting foundation of the chimney, poked his head around the corner and glared at the intruder.

"I see it!" shouted Fighting Fred, catching the luminous shine of the detective's eyes in the gloom. "It's some kind o' a varmint."

Nevertheless, to make sure, he continued his advance toward the chimney, shifting the knife from his teeth to his right hand.

When the creeping man reached the base of the chimney, Brentwood, fearing he would be discovered if he allowed the fellow to come further, gave utterance to the deep and threatening growl of a badger.

"Nothin' but a durned badger, jest as I thought!" Fighting Fred cried in disgust, backing away from the dangerous locality. "I don't keer about havin' my eyes scratched out by goin' any furdur."

Hammond and the men outside had also heard the threatening growl, and were fully convinced of its genuineness.

"We're after bigger game than that!" averred Hammond, laughing. "Come on out."

Brentwood breathed freer as the investigator began a retrograde movement that soon carried him from beneath the building. Nevertheless, he did not move until long after the sounds of retreating footsteps had died away.

Then he ventured to the opening. After convincing himself that the place was deserted, he crept forth.

"Matters are shaping so that no further delay is allowable!" he argued, as he slipped away in the darkness. "I must strike at once!"

He went direct to John Mitchell's and aroused the family by a series of vigorous raps.

"Get ready to go with me, Mitchell!" he ordered, as the old miner came to the door.

Then he hastily explained the situation, and told of the discoveries of the night.

"We must find this mountain retreat without further loss of time. Murder may result if the matter is delayed too long. The Tom-cat hasn't returned, and we will be forced to act without him."

Molly plied him with questions and suggestions; and considerable time elapsed before the detective and the miner left the house.

"Those scamps of the Silver Circle went on into town," explained Brentwood, as they proceeded up the trail, "and the chances are that we will find some of them hanging around the saloons and gambling-house. My plan is to capture one of them, and compel him to lead us to this mountain stronghold."

"The very idee!" assented Mitchell, enthusiastically.

As anticipated, Hammond's men were found pretty well distributed among the drinking and gambling dens.

Concealing themselves in a dark alley near one of these, they patiently waited for some member of the Silver Circle to make his appearance.

Many men passed in and out, but not the ones they wanted. For more than an hour they stood there, silent and almost motionless. Then a low-browed individual, with rascal and thief marked all over his repulsive features, came out upon the pavement and turned up the street toward them.

All unsuspecting he advanced, passed into the bar of gloom that marked the mouth of the alley, then sunk down in a senseless heap as suddenly as if stricken by a thunderbolt.

The detective had leaped forward and dealt the fellow a blow on the head that had stunned him into immediate insensibility.

"Rather rough 'treatment!" he said, half-regretfully, as he bent over the prostrate form.

"But, I had to do it. It was the only way to keep him from giving an alarm. He's not hurt seriously, and will be as lively as ever in the course of a few minutes. Bear a hand, Mitchell, and let's carry him back. Some of his pals may follow him and discover us."

Lifting him between them they bore him slowly up the alley.

"Hello! He's comin' to!" cried Mitchell, almost dropping the man, as a groan escaped the fellows lips.

"I knew he would come around pretty soon!" Brentwood replied, laughing at the old miner's startled cry. "I gave him quite a little tap, but these gentry generally have heads like iron. Tie his hands and feet, and we'll wait till he revives."

They had lowered the man to the ground while the detective was speaking; and as soon as the cords were properly secured and knotted, the detective seated himself in front of their prisoner. At the same time he produced a revolver and held it menacingly at his head.

After a few twists and groans, the rascal opened his eyes and tried to sit up. The light in the alley was sufficient to reveal the man before him and the threatening revolver.

"Arrah, now! Phat do yees be meanin' by this outrage?" he spluttered.

"Go slow, Mulligan!" warned the detective, thrusting the cold muzzle of the revolver almost into the fellow's face. "If you raise that musical voice above a whisper, I'll pull trigger."

He recognized Brentwood, and cowered and whimpered like a whipped hound.

"If you'll go along with us quietly, you'll not be hurt! You can walk, but if you try to run or make any outcry I'll not be responsible for the consequences. Untie his legs, John!"

Mitchell cast off the rope; and the Irishman arose to his feet when Brentwood gave the command.

"Now move on! Get out your revolver, Mitchell. If he attempts a break we can't both miss him."

These threats, and the fierce tone in which they were uttered, completely broke the Irishman's spirit—which was exactly the thing the captor intended.

"Oill go along as aisy as a kitten, av ye'll on'y take them goons away from me h'id!" he pleaded.

"We'll not keep them pointed at your head, Mulligan, if you show that you're disposed to act fair; but we'll hold them in our hands, cocked and ready."

"Now, walk along! You know the way to John Mitchell's house? When we get out of the alley turn into the trail that leads to it."

Mulligan waited for no further instruction, but shuffled along at a lively rate. He cast an appealing glance around, when the end of the alley was reached, but no aiding hand was near, and he turned quietly into the trail leading to Mitchell's.

"Only a temporary guest!" assured Brentwood, smiling, as Molly came to open the door. "We'll hustle him out of here before daylight."

"Now, Mulligan," he said, sternly, seating himself and motioning the Irishman to a chair opposite, "I am going to ask you some questions, and I warn you that I want only straight answers."

"You belong to Hammond's band of thieves and cut-throats! Plain words, eh? But they're the truth!"

"Dade, Mither Brentwood, an' I—"

"You are one of Hammond's men and I know it. I heard all that was said and done at your meeting to-night."

Mulligan gave a start of surprise.

"I was the badger that Fighting Fred found under the house. So you see it's no use to lie to me, Mulligan, for I know all about you and your gang."

The detective saw that this blow was a crusher for the Irishman sunk back in a limp heap and stared from face to face in helpless and bewildered amazement.

"What I want you to do is to lead me to Hammond's secret retreat in the hills."

"He would kill me for doin' av that!" protested the Irishman.

"And I'll kill you if you don't. Come, where is the place? I haven't much time to waste in asking questions, for it's creeping along toward morning. If you don't answer willingly, I'll take measures to force you to answer unwillingly."

There was no mistaking the determined ring in the detective's voice.

"It's across the river, some ten or twelve moiles down, an' out in the mount'ins!" Mulligan replied, doggedly.

"Well, you'll have to lead us there. If you take us astray—I'm tapping his revolver significantly."

"Ye kin trust me!" declared Mulligan, fawningly. "Oi suppose ye'll let me go, thin?"

"That depends altogether on how you act. If you treat us fair, yes!"

Then, turning to Mitchell:

"I'll help you with the fellow into the grove below the mine buildings. You'll not be disturbed there; and we'll tie him up, so that he can play no tricks on you. I must get a dozen or two good men together as soon as I can."

Mulligan protested that he would not budge an inch, even if he was not tied at all; but Brentwood did not care to trust him too far.

Just as day was breaking, the detective hurried from the grove and set about his task of collecting a force of resolute and reliable men.

When this was accomplished, the morning was far advanced.

On returning to the grove he was surprised to find Molly there, mounted on her pony and arrayed for battle.

"You are not thinking of going?" he asked, in surprise.

"Why certainly I am!" she replied, laughing at his amazement.

"But the way will be so rough you cannot ride, and the distance is too great for you to walk it."

"Molly's got that all fixed!" said Mitchell, nodding his head sagely. "That boss can climb like a goat, an' swim like a duck. I'm to swim 'im acrost the branch yender, an' Molly'll foler in the boat."

Brentwood began a protest, but finding it of no avail, turned his attention to the men who were now arriving singly and in groups of twos and threes.

"Molly allus would have her way!" mused the old man, noting the action. "Ef she gits the Tom-cat he'll quit wearin' thet caper there'll be a row in the fambly!"

There was but one boat available; and the party was transported across the stream two at a time concealed by the sheltering belt of the timber.

Then John Mitchell swam the pony across, and the march upon the cavern was commenced.

It was a toilsome and laborious journey, and occupied almost the entire day.

Just before sunset Mulligan halted.

"It's roight across the ridge, now!" he whispered, pointing out the way with a very dirty forefinger. "It's in a little cubby-hole wid rocks an' threes around it."

The fellow was as pale as a corpse and fairly trembled, so great was his fear of the man he was betraying.

Brentwood sent a scout ahead, and led the advance in person.

All was quiet when they reached the fringe of trees which concealed the mouth of the cave.

Then a shot rung out, followed by a series of cat-howls and screeches.

"That's the Tom-cat!" shouted Brentwood, excitedly. "Forward!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

A SURPRISE.

BRENTWOOD drew his revolver and bounded into the dimly-lighted cavern, his followers close at his heels.

The Tom-cat, heedless of consequences, seemed rushing to certain destruction, but the fire in his eyes boded death to some, at least, of the dastardly crew who had so remorselessly strung up poor Clifford Curtis.

Curtis was now upon the ground, apparently dead, and Lily was bending over him in blind agony.

Twice the Tom-cat's deadly revolver spoke, and each time it found a victim. Hammond and Bonanza Bill went down, before they had time to grasp the meaning of the sudden charge.

Then, as Brentwood's ringing cheer smote the echoing walls and galleries, the rest of the miscreants broke into a disorderly and panicky flight.

Two men fell before they succeeded in effecting an escape by way of the winding galleries—one of them being Pedro, the Mexican.

The chase was short, sharp and furious.

When Brentwood and the cowboy returned from it, they found that Curtis had regained consciousness. A purple mark around his neck alone showed the results of the severe choking he had received.

Possibly Hammond did not intend his death, and only took that means of frightening Lily into a compliance with his wishes. Whatever the intentions of the Silver Chief, in that respect, no one could say that his death had not been merited by his villainy.

While congratulations were yet being showered upon Curtis, a bound and gagged figure rolled slowly and painfully into the chamber from one of the side galleries.

At sight of this figure Lily gave a startled shriek, while exclamations of astonishment and wonder broke from the lips of many present.

"Oh, father!" Lily screamed, rushing forward and throwing herself prostrate upon the form of the helpless man.

It was Edgerton, the Gold King, whom all present had supposed confined at that moment in the Silver City jail.

The Tom-cat quickly cut his bonds and assisted him to an upright posture. So tightly had the cords been knotted, and so painful the choking gag, that it was some moments before he could walk, or speak distinctly.

"That is not the man I saw in Silver City jail!" asserted Brentwood, regarding him with an intense earnestness. "There is a general resemblance, but that is not the man."

"Jail? jail?" stammered the Gold King, staring at the detective, who was wholly unknown to him. "The man is mad! I have been in no jail!"

"You are puzzling us, father!" said Lily, sobbingly, looking from her parent to her lover.

"Nothing puzzling about it!" the Gold King protested, beginning to find the use of his tongue. "I have been in the hands of a set of scoundrels who have been torturing me to make me sign away my rights in the Edgerton Mine. But I wouldn't do it. No! fire couldn't make me do it! So they trussed me up just as you saw me a little while ago and left me in the cavern over there to die."

"When I heard the shots and the shouting I knew that a rescue was being attempted, and so I rolled out here. Took me a quarter of an hour to do it, though. Nothing puzzling about that, that I can see!"

"Then you didn't shoot Clifford, as I thought you did?"

"Shoot fiddlesticks! I was rather wrathful against the young man at first, I'll admit; and no doubt I said some things I oughtn't to have said; but I didn't really intend to shoot him, or to harm him in any way but get rid of him as your suitor—that is all."

"I was a good deal excited, and was harsh and unjust in what I said to you, my child. I admit it now, and am sorry for it. But I have had ample time to think all of that over while lying here, tied up by these villains, and I say frankly that a little cool reflection generally works a mighty change in a man's hastily-formed opinions or too selfish ambitions."

"When I married your mother, my dear, I married the woman I loved because I loved, and I shall have no objection if Clifford Curtis does likewise."

"Whoop! Mariar!" shouted the Tom-cat, quite overcome by the turn of affairs.

Then in a low voice to Molly, who was standing near:

"An' I calc'late that John Mitchell is a-thinkin' just like that air Gold King, this blessed minnit!"

Molly dashed the tears from her eyes, and gave him a sound box on the ear, for his impudence.

Then Brentwood took a hand in the running fire of comment and question and explanation, and by the time night had set in our little circle of friends grew quite jovial.

It was impossible to climb the rocky, homeward trail in the night and darkness. So Mulligan was set at liberty and the bodies of the slain desperadoes were borne away and given burial. Rousing fires were built in the outer cavern chamber and the jubilant party prepared to pass the night.

When they reached Silver City the next day it was found that "Blinky" Smith, the jailer, was gone and with him the prisoner he had been so sedulously guarding!

Then Hank Hammond's plot became revealed in its entirety.

Profiting by the tirade of abuse and threats which the Gold King had been publicly heaping upon Curtis, he at once set on foot a scheme which promised to make him master of the Edgerton mining property.

He selected one of his men who most nearly resembled Edgerton in general appearance. This man was instructed to so disguise and dress himself as to increase the resemblance, and then seek an opportunity to kill Clifford Curtis—the object being to make the world believe that the Gold King was the actual murderer.

Hammond was in waiting when the cowardly shot was fired. Then, as Curtis was only wounded and stunned into insensibility, his heart failed him, and brought about a change in his plans.

He had Curtis carried away to the mountain cave, abducted the sleeping Gold King, and had had the unconscious daughter placed in care of the family servants—all done through no spirit of tenderness or mercy, but in the hope that if his plans miscarried, the inevitable punishment would not be so great. Deliberate murder, as he well knew, was a quick hanging offense, even in Silver City.

This change of plan necessitated a mock funeral, and the incarceration of the Gold King's personator in the Silver City jail.

As "Blinky" Smith, the jailer, was in Hammond's pay and confidence, the accomplishment of the latter presented no especial difficulties.

It was now remembered that the pretended prisoner had been carefully excluded from the view of the general public. In fact, no one not in the secret had seen him except Brentwood; and to the detective the Gold King was unknown.

The delay of the rescuers at the cavern had given the jailer and "prisoner" ample time to receive warning and effect their escape.

And now that the tangled web of mysteries has been swept away, what remains to be said?

Only this:

Lily Edgerton and Clifford Curtis were soon after happily married.

Bruce Brentwood, the tireless and indefatigable, is still a terror to the scoundrels of the border.

And the brave, the reckless, the irrepressible Tom-cat has discarded his beloved cap!

Why?

He is now the life partner of rosy Molly Mitchell, the miner's daughter, and a more docile, tractable, but "rantankerously happy Tom-cat"—as he avers—does not exist.

THE END.

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